MATURE-AGE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA

BY

PINIAS WALOMBOLENI KASHEDI

THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

THE MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY DEGREE IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

AT

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

SUPERVISOR: PROF. PETER N. RULE

DECEMBER 2021

DECLARATION

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

ABSTRACT

Studies show that institutions of higher learning around the world are experiencing an increase in the number of non-traditional students in general and mature-age students in particular (Longden, 2002 & 2006, US Department of Education, 2002, UNESCO, 2010, Heagney & Benson, 2017 and Ho & Lim, 2019). This change presents challenges to higher education institutions. In Namibia, a number of interventions have led to an increase in interest and enrolment of mature-age students to obtain higher education qualifications.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate and explore how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM). This overall purpose includes understanding their attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies as well as the challenges they face during their studies. The study also looked into factors influencing their learning experience. This study moves beyond a quantitative analysis of understanding students' experiences to an interpretivist design in order to discern the subjective world of human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This qualitative research collected data in the form of text through interviews and focus group discussions to understand students' experiences and their perceived challenges. The qualitative data was thematically analysed by way of meaning-making which focused on how individuals personally attach meaning to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, cited in Creswell, 2016).

The study found that mature-age students are motivated to obtain undergraduate qualifications for continuous professional development including career advancement and certification. They also showed cognitive interest as well as a desire to remedy past educational deficiencies. The findings also show that they are in favour of a more practical than theoretical learning experience. Furthermore, the study revealed five major challenges influencing mature-age student's learning experiences; which are financial, situational and psychological barriers, technology, time constraints, poor administration and management. It was also discovered that UNAM's curriculum is relevant, with course content which is both up-to-date and understandable. However, the data showed that there is a need for the content to be more related to the African socio-economic context. The data also suggested that the teaching strategies used do not meet the learning needs of mature-age students and, in addition, learner participation is said to be minimal.

Finally, the data also showed that student support services such as orientation and registration are carried out smoothly and that mature-age students are happy with the assistance provided

by lecturers during consultation hours. Mature-age students make much use of the informal peer support available through mobile applications offered by traditional students. Finally, it was found that the older mature-age students experience a sense of isolation and face challenges adjusting to the university way of life.

OPSOMMING

Studies toon dat hoëronderwysinstellings regoor die wêreld 'n toename in die aantal nie-tradisionele studente in die algemeen en volwasse studente in die besonder ervaar (Longden, 2002 & 2006, US Department of Education, 2002, UNESCO, 2010, Heagney & Benson, 2017 en Ho & Lim, 2019).

Hierdie verandering bied uitdagings vir hoëronderwysinstellings. In Namibië het 'n aantal intervensies gelei tot 'n belangstelling en toename deur volwasse studente om hoër kwalifikasies te verwerf. Die hoofdoel van hierdie studie was om te ondersoek en te verken hoe volwasse studente in voorgraadse programme hul leerervarings aan die Universiteit van Namibië (UNAM) ervaar. Hierdie omvatttende doel sluit in om te verstaan wat hul houding teenoor onderrigmetodes en -strategieë is, asook die uitdagings waarmee hulle tydens hul studies te make het. Die studie het ook gekyk na faktore wat hul leerervaring beïnvloed. Hierdie studie gaan verder as 'n kwantitatiewe analise van die begrip van studente se ervarings tot 'n interpretivistiese ontwerp om die subjektiewe wêreld van menslike ervaring te onderskei (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Hierdie kwalitatiewe navorsing het data in die vorm van teks versamel deur middel van onderhoude en fokusgroepbesprekings om studente se ervarings en hul waargenome uitdagings te verstaan. Die kwalitatiewe data is tematies geanaliseer aan die hand van betekenisgewing, wat gefokus het op hoe individue persoonlik betekenis aan die verskynsel heg (Moustakas, 1994, aangehaal in Creswell, 2016).

Die studie het bevind dat volwasse studente gemotiveerd is om voorgraadse kwalifikasies te verwerf vir deurlopende professionele ontwikkeling, insluitend loopbaanbevordering en sertifisering. Daar word ook kognitiewe belangstelling getoon sowel as om op te maak vir tekortkominge in hul vorige opvoeding. Die bevindinge toon ook dat hulle 'n meer praktiese leerervaring het. Verder het die studie vyf groot uitdagings aan die lig gebring wat die leerervaring van volwasse studente beïnvloed; dit is finansiële, situasionele en sielkundige hindernisse, tegnologie, tydsbeperkings en swak administrasie en bestuur. Daar is ook ontdek dat UNAM se leergang relevant is, die kursusse se inhoud is op datum en verstaanbaar. Die data dui wel aan dat 'n behoefte bestaan vir die inhoud om meer verband te hou met die Afrika se sosio-ekonomiese konteks. Die gegewens dui ook daarop dat die onderrigstrategieë wat gebruik word nie aan die leerbehoeftes van volwasse studente voldoen nie, en dat die leerder se deelname ook minimaal is.

Laastens toon die data ook dat studente-ondersteuningsdienste soos oriëntering en registrasie glad verloop en dat volwasse studente tevrede is met die hulp wat dosente tydens konsultasietyd bied. Volwasse studente maak meer gebruik van die informele portuurondersteuning wat beskikbaar is deur mobiele toepassings wat deur tradisionele studente aangebied word. Daar is ook bevind dat volwasse studente 'n gevoel van isolasie ervaar en sukkel soms om aan te pas by universiteitslewe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is possible by the Lord our God who makes everything possible. All wisdom and strength come from Him.

I am equally grateful to my research supervisor Professor Peter Rule for devoting much of his time to help me achieve this great milestone. His great wisdom and patience made all this possible.

Thank you to the UNAM staff and students who made it possible for me to carry out this study. I have learned so much from the interviews and group discussions.

My beautiful wife Lavinia Kashedi, my peers and the entire Centre for Higher and Adult Education at the University of Stellenbosch, thank you for your support and endless words of encouragement.

I am Grateful!!!

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family, the Centre for Higher and Adult Education, my peers and the entire academia as my source of inspiration.

ACRONYMS:

ACHE	American College of Health Care Executives
CAEL	Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
CLEP	College Level Examination Program
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRP	University of Namibia's Centre for Research and Publication
DANTES	Defence Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support
GPA	Grade Point Average
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
NCES	National Centre for Education and Statistics
NSFAF	Namibia Students Financial Assistance Fund
PLA	Prior Learning Assessment
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SDL	Self-Directed Learning
US	United States
UK	United Kingdom
UNAM	University of Namibia
UNESCO	United Nations Education and Scientific Organisation

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Shortly after graduating, I was fortunate to work with one of the professors who was also the director of the teaching and learning unit at the University of Namibia (UNAM). My task was to analyse the end of semester Learner-Faculty evaluation surveys. I was interested to learn how mostly mature-age adult students were dissatisfied with the available support compared to the younger traditional students. Furthermore, as a student assistant and tutor for first-year students, during my studies, I was inundated with requests from the older adult students to provide additional support and tutorials to them. With this experience, I always wanted to find out how older students (referred to as mature-age or non-traditional students in literature) in undergraduate programs perceive their learning experience at the university.

Studies show that institutions of higher learning around the world have been and are experiencing changes in the demographics of student populations (Longden, 2002 & 2006, US Department of Education, 2002, UNESCO, 2010, Heagney & Benson, 2017 and Ho & Lim, 2019). The number of mature-age students is increasing, and universities and colleges are faced with limited resources to address these changes. In the United States (US) mature-age students make up 40-45% of the total undergraduate enrolment (Donaldson and Graham, 1999 & Kasworm, 2018). Many universities appear to be enrolling and offering programmes for mature-age students. However, they often do not recognise the special needs of the adult learners due to their diverse needs, expectations and experiences (Milheim, 2005).

The literature on mature-age students seems to focus more on comparing mature-age students with traditional students who go to university soon after secondary school, especially in terms of retention and performance. Studies, mostly done in the US, Europe and Australia found that non-traditional students place classroom engagement at the centre of their university experience (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Chen, 2014; Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Dill & Henley, 1998 & Gilardi & Guglielmetti 2011). Not many of these studies have exclusively looked at how mature-age students as a category of non-traditional students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences as a whole.

There is currently an emphasis on lifelong learning. Universities especially in Namibia, are employing different methods, such as, the recognition of prior learning and mature-age entry,

to attract mature-age students. However, universities do not seem to be concerned with understanding mature-age students' needs and circumstances, thereby maintaining a historic institutional system designed for the traditional students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

Mature-age students, who are mainly adult learners beginning or continuing their enrolment as college students at a later-than-typical age, have characteristics not typically associated with participation in university at undergraduate level. These characteristics include: experiencing delayed entry to university by at least one year following high school, having dependents, being a single parent, being a full-time employee, being financially independent, attending university on a part-time basis and not having a high school diploma (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Dill & Henley, 1998).

Many studies and reports have used the term 'non-traditional student' which is somewhat broad and includes mature-age students, students from marginalised and indigenous communities, immigrants, women, veterans and first-generation students in undergraduate programmes (Chen, 2014; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Milheim, 2005; Richardson & King, 1998 and Kasworm, 2018). First-generation students are those who are first in their family to enrol and attend university and are often disadvantages by their parents' lack of university experience and by other socio-economic factors. First-generation students are associated with lower retention rate (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

For the purposes of this study, I will use the term mature-age students to include adult learners who are financially independent and who are assuming adult roles in society such as parent, employee, or leader in civil society (Heagney & Benson, 2017, Kasworm 2018 and Saddler & Sundén, 2020). The term also encompasses older students returning or enrolling to obtain qualifications for various purposes such as advancing their careers or certification for the first time (Milheim, 2005).

This increase in the number of mature-age students (Longden, 2002 & 2006; US Department of Education, 2002; UNESCO, 2010; Heagney & Benson, 2017 and Ho & Lim, 2019) presents challenges to higher education institutions, and Namibian institutions of higher learning are no exception. According to Ho and Lim (2019) "*teaching conversely has become more complex"* (p. 99). Many studies have found that mature-age students, also bring different skills, experiences and expectations to the learning environment compared to traditionally-aged students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Dill & Henley, 1998 and

Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Some studies found that at times, they are uncomfortable in class because they believe themselves to be less prepared, than their younger counterparts. This, in turn, significantly affects their self-confidence (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992). Contrary to this assertion are findings from an Australian context which suggest that mature-age students are actually better prepared than their younger counterparts, due to their rich personal biographies (Donaldson & Graham, 2011) a greater desire to learn and marked enthusiasm for learning (Dill & Henley, 1998).

Work and life experience according to Miller (1987) changes the way students interact with faculty. They also find it difficult to adjust from having an independent status to being a student, dependent on faculty and school administrators for support during university years. In most cases, university support services are primarily utilised to meet the needs of traditionally-aged students. For example, some tutorials for full-time undergraduate students are scheduled to take place after hours, which is inconvenient for mature-age students who have work, household and childcare responsibilities. It is therefore vital to assess the impact of support services on mature-age students because support services are an integral part of students' university experiences.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Recently, there have been a number of higher education interventions by the Namibian government. These include, the recognition of prior-learning and mature age entry programmes, as well as an increased private sector investment in professional development and continuing education. As a result, there has been an increase in the number of mature-age students enrolling at universities and colleges in the country (UNAM Statistics Office, 2018). This trend presents a number of challenges as well as opportunities for the higher education institutions.

In most cases, teaching and learning strategies, activities and policies are designed primarily to meet the needs of traditionally aged students. I therefore sought to understand how mature-age students perceive their undergraduate learning experience, identify and understand their challenges and factors influencing their learning experience and to also find out if student support services are effective enough to foster their success. The current knowledge and understanding of students' learning experiences at most universities in Namibia and at UNAM in particular is limited to end of semester student-lecturer evaluations. These quantitative based

reports provide very narrow information and understanding of students' learning experiences. These evaluations are also very homogeneous in their design and provide only a generalised understanding of all students. This research moved beyond a quantitative analysis of the students' learning experiences and specifically targeted mature-age students. The interest of the research was to investigate and explore mature-age student learning experiences at the undergraduate level, so as to provide some recommendations and contribute to the improvement of the mature-age students' learning experiences and learning outcomes.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to investigate and explore how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM). This overall purpose includes understanding attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies as well as the challenges they face during their studies. Furthermore, this study looked into factors influencing their learning experiences and how they make connections between new knowledge and their day-to-day life. I also explored the concept of motivation in terms of what motivates mature aged students to seek and enrol for a higher educational qualification. My assumption was that their motivation influenced the way they interact with lecturers, their courses or subjects and other students. I hoped to also uncover how mature-age students perceive the effectiveness of student support services and programs.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) argue that there is a need to study and analyse mature-age students entering universities because, at present, many university policies and practices are designed to support younger students. This study will help facilitate dialogue within the field of higher education. This dialogue could result in improved learning experiences and subsequently more mature adult students enrolling. It could also help increase the number of mature-age students who successfully graduate and meet their educational goals, thereby benefitting both the students, their educational institution and society as a whole.

1.3. Research Questions

In order to understand the experiences of the mature-age students, this study attempted to answer the following questions:

- How do mature-age undergraduate students perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia?

The following are the specific research questions:

1. What are the factors influencing mature-age students' learning experiences in undergraduate programmes?
2. What are mature-age students' attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies?
3. How do mature-age students perceive the effectiveness of student support services?
4. What are the perceived challenges that they face during their studies?

1.4. Methodology

Methodology, according to Ellen (1984, p.9) is "*an articulated theoretically informed approach to the production of data*", including methods of collecting and analysing data which depend on the design of that project and the researcher's theoretical mindset (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). I situated this research project within the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm. This is a philosophical outlook towards research in which researchers are interested in understanding the subjective world of human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This study moves beyond a quantitative analysis of understanding students' experience to an interpretivist design using qualitative data in order to discern the subjective world of human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Qualitative research endeavours to understand social phenomena by understanding individual and group perspectives. With a qualitative approach to this study, I was able to understand the students' learning experiences through the students' own eyes (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016 p.56).

The population of this study was mature-age students in undergraduate programmes at UNAM, and it targeted mostly those in their second, third or final year of study. To ensure a better understanding of the phenomena, a sample was drawn from across all faculties and departments of the university in order to understand this phenomenon. I selected mature-age students for the individual interviews through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was the best strategy for this study due to the COVID-19 situation. I also used a mixed sampling method for the focus group discussions and this included purposive and network sampling.

This qualitative research study collected data in the form of texts, to understand students' experiences and their perceived challenges. I collected data using individual interviews and focus groups. This was in a bid to understand the mature-age students' perceptions of their

learning experiences. I asked students through individual interviews what their attitudes were towards the teaching methods, techniques and learning styles. I also asked how they perceived the effectiveness of student support services and what they perceived as challenges during their studies. The qualitative data from the individual interviews and focus group discussion were thematically analysed by way of meaning-making which focused on how individuals personally attach meaning to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, cited in Cresswell *et al.*, 2016).

1.5. Brief overview of Chapters

1.5.1. Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review chapter presents a summary of the current state of knowledge on the topic of mature-age adult learners in different regions and contexts (Neuman 2014, p. 127). It identifies ideas and thoughts which support and oppose my points of view regarding mature-age students and allows me to engage these thoughts in my own analysis and discussions (Okeke & van Wyk, 2015, p.134).

This review begins with a description of what constitutes a mature-age adult student in different contexts and cultures, including Namibia. It further provides an analysis of access to higher education by mature-aged students. Historically, access to higher education by non-traditional students, especially mature adults, has been difficult. More recently mature-age student numbers have been on the rise in virtually all regions of the world. A theoretical framework of ideas coming out of the literature review is presented in this chapter. I have used these ideas to understand this topic and study better.

1.5.2. Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology chapter presents the design and research methods used in this study. The chapter describes the research approaches and examines the research population, sample size and sampling techniques. It further depicts the types of data collection methods and instruments which were utilised and the procedures employed to collect and analyse data from the respondents.

1.5.3. Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis of Findings

This chapter presents the data and analysis of findings obtained through interviews and focus group discussions with mature-age students at UNAM to come up with the findings of the study. The analysis of data was done through thematic content analysis, a method for describing data, which also involves interpretation in the processes of selecting codes and constructing themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Through thematic content analysis, I constructed themes to reframe, reinterpret, and/or connect elements of the data. The categories of findings are motivation, challenges faced during studies, classroom and academic experiences, support services, isolation and adjustment.

1.5.4. Chapter 5: Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 5 summarises the findings generated by the study and presents answers to the research questions. It also provides conclusions and recommendation of the study, as well as my own reflections on what I have learnt from doing the study.

1.6. Summary

This chapter provided an orientation to the study by highlighting the demographic changes in the student populations. It provided a motivation for the study by stating the problem and why an inquiry was needed. The increase in the number of mature-age students presents challenges to the higher education institutions. Thus, there is a need to investigate and explore how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM). This chapter also outlined the guiding research questions and briefly introduced the methodology used.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This "integrative literature review" will present a summary of the current state of knowledge on the topic of mature-age adult learners in different regions and contexts (Neuman, 2014, p. 127). It will identify ideas and thoughts which support and oppose my points of view regarding mature-age students and allow me to engage these thoughts in my own arguments as I discuss the results of the study (Okeke & van Wyk, 2015, p.134). I hoped to also use themes emanating from the literature as a basis for data collection, analysis and interpretation. It will also highlight what other researchers have already found out about mature-age students (Neuman, 2014).

This review begins with a description of what constitutes a mature-age adult student in different contexts and cultures, including Namibia. It will further provide an analysis of access to higher education by mature-aged students. Historically, access to higher education by non-traditional students, especially mature adults, has been difficult. More recently mature-age student numbers have been on the rise in virtually all regions of the world (Longden, 2002 & 2006; US Department of Education, 2002; UNESCO, 2010; Heagney & Benson, 2017 and Ho & Lim, 2019). Motivation and barriers to participating in higher education are aspects widely studied and discussed in the literature on mature-age students and which is also highlighted here. Do adults stay and successfully complete their studies after enrolling in higher education? This literature review will also attempt to answer this question.

Finally, a theoretical framework for the study is presented. The framework was useful in assisting the study to formulate research questions and also to analyse and interpret the data emanating from the individual and focus group interviews.

2.2. Who are Mature-aged Students?

Mature-aged adult students form part of the broader category of non-traditional students and, according to Fragoso, Goncalves, Ribeiro, Monteiro, Bago, Fonseca, Santos (2013) they have been under-represented in higher education in the past. The term "non-traditional student" is used in describing students who do not fit the traditional students' category and include adults or mature-aged students, students with disabilities, immigrants, the marginalised and first generation students. However, Hardin (2008) believes that not all non-traditional students are adult students. She asserts that the term non-traditional can include traditionally-aged students

who share common characteristics with their adult counterparts. These characteristics, Hardin (2008, p. 52) argues, which often put them at risk of being unsuccessful, include: "delaying enrolment into higher education until adulthood; enrolling part time; working full time; being financially independent; being financially responsible for others; having family responsibilities; and having academic deficiencies". On the other hand, a traditional student, according to Tasso Eira de Aquino, Allen, Lawton and Whitney (2006) is a person who graduated from high school and is enrolled at a college or university on a full-time basis, and is sometimes dependant on family for financial support, and has no dependents.

Moreover, some researchers have found that it is difficult to try to set boundaries to demarcate adult students entering university from the conventional high school graduates especially in this day and age. Ho and Lim (2020) point out that, while it is common to define an adult by legal age, "it is not simple to use the same principle" to define an adult learner. For example, a nineteen-year-old undergraduate may already be a parent with adult responsibilities, whereas a twenty-four-year-old undergraduate may still be a student who never left school (Ho & Lin, 2020, p.100). Young-Lovell (2009, p. 15) points out that the definition of an adult student is "arbitrary and varies both within and across national systems of higher education". In Namibia, for example, the legal age of adulthood is 18 and older; consequently, in this case even traditional college students are adults.

Furthermore, mature-aged adult students in higher education cannot be treated as a homogenous group; therefore, making general statements about them is difficult and should be avoided (Wilson,1997). This is because mature-age students are "more diverse than younger students in their motivations, needs and expectations of higher education" (Richardson & King, 1998, p. 66). Phillips (1986) and Kasworm (2018, p. 84) also posit that mature student cannot be regarded as a homogenous group owing to their differing backgrounds and "circumstances requiring social independence, commitment to family and work, and personal identities that have evolved beyond those of a traditional full-time student".

Nevertheless, studies have also found that institutions of higher learning around the world are experiencing changes in the demographics of student populations (Longden, 2002 & 2006, US Department of Education, 2002, UNESCO, 2010). In the US, for example, between 1995 and 2000, mature-aged students constituted 27% of all undergraduates (National Centre for Educational Statistics NCES, 2006) and between 1979 – 1980 7.1 million adults aged 24 or older were part of the 43% of all undergraduates in US institutions of higher learning, compared

to 5.73 million adult students enrolled 10 year earlier (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Before then, adult students represented approximately 34% - 40% of the undergraduate population in 1980, (Kasworm, 1980); with 1960's statistics reporting 31% of undergraduate students were adult students (US Bureau of the Census, 1977).

More recent statistics in the US also show that there is a general growth in the number of adult students in institutions of higher learning. From 2011 to 2021, the enrolment by adult students (age 25 and up) is up within 4-year non-profit colleges and universities by +14% and this, Pearson (2019) attributes to a wide-spread adoption of online models. However, the 4-year statistics have seen a decline of -8%. The enrolment in public 2 years and 4 years for-profits has taken an enormous nose-dive, declining by -45% in the 2-year sector and -52% in the for-profit sector (Pearson, 2019). Furthermore, Pearson (2018) indicates that a sizable drop (roughly 11%) experienced by the community college sector from August 2019 to August 2020 is part of a long trajectory of declines but is exacerbated by the pandemic. The pandemic has hit especially hard the low-wage workers in the hospitality and office services.

The continued increase in the number of adult undergraduate students has become a significant source of both enrolment and income for many universities and colleges for which the proportion of "traditional age" students (typically defined as between 18 to 22 years of age) is said to be shrinking in many countries. As a result, universities and colleges are faced with limited resources in dealing with these changes (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

Mature-aged students, therefore, for the purposes of this study, are adults 24 years and above in higher education, who are financially independent and are assuming adult roles such as parenting and employment in society, as well as having a significant civic volunteering and/or leadership role. This category includes those who have a commitment to family and work and those beginning or continuing their education at age 22 or later. This research has also used these characteristics as criteria for selecting participants in the study.

2.3. Access to Higher Education

Access to higher education began as a "paradigm of inherited merit", where a very limited number of academically gifted students were admitted based on their socio-economic and educational backgrounds (Essack, 2010, p. 17). In addition, it was assumed that undergraduate education should only be for academically gifted youth from high schools, representing full-time students who would spend more years in higher education and will have lasting impact on

society (Kasworm, 2008) Kasworm further points out that during that time, admission decisions were based on assumptions that adults had weakening cognitive abilities and therefore could not be admitted (2008).

In this section I will look at the notion of access from a conceptual point of view, and then proceed to examine evidence regarding the access of mature-age students to higher education in the US, Europe and Africa, including Namibia.

Furthermore, increased access to higher education by was made possible by specialised units to serve adult learners beyond fulltime programmes (Kasworm, 2018, p. 78). These specialised units provided access to adult learners, were focused on access and flexibility and were different from the youth-oriented academic structures. They had their own leadership and staffing needs, and specific offices were often referred to as extensions, centre for continuing education etc. Beyond providing access to formal undergraduate education for adults, these institutions discovered that adults are motivated differently, and have more focused goals with strong academic performance (Kasworm, 2018, p. 79). Their maturity raised academic and moral standards, and "they set a pattern of campus behaviour for over half a decade" (Olson, 1974, p. 109).

Fragoso *et al.* (2013) warns that educational debates concerning access mostly stresses the process of entering or admission into university. However, according to Kasworm (2018), adult higher education should rather focus upon the principle of equality and equity of access and support for adults who are workers and parents seeking collegiate degrees.

There are dimensions of access which require equal attention and these are physical, financial, social and epistemological access. According to Rule and Aitchison (2005) access to the university in a South African context can either be through matriculation exemption or through a special route, for example though mature-age entry. They further state that access to the institution has a financial dimension determined by the affordability of student fees. Thus, unemployed students might not have the financial means to pay for their studies. The other dimension of access is epistemic which is about entry into "valued academic discourse and participation in discourse communities" (Rule & Aitchison, 2005, p.4). This, I think, is especially important for mature-age students who are extrinsically motivated and are looking to enhance their practical knowledge and skills to improve their communities or obtain promotions in their jobs. The epistemic dimension also signifies the chance to progress

academically to other levels of study (Rule & Aitchison, 2005). The social dimension, on the other hand, is about participation in discourse communities (p.4).

However, as Osborne (2003) states, "improving access is one thing, while ensuring progression within and beyond higher education for mature-aged students is another" (cited in Fragoso *et al.,* 2013 p.5). Fragoso *et al.,* notes that although some issues of access can be dealt with, "retention must also be considered if the gains of access are to be consolidated, fostering social mobility and social development" (2013, p.5). I will discuss the issue of retention in the next section.

In the US, through the work of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), prior learning assessment has become part of the fabric of many adult programs in colleges and universities. Kasworm (2018, p. 79) adds that "access and enrolment of mature adult students, mostly World War II veterans, was made possible by the Federal Serviceman's Readjustment Act, also known as the "GI Bill" through the development of prior learning assessment." This sudden increase in the adult student population influenced youth-focused institutions to open up access to veterans.

Nationwide, access to higher education by adult students in the US was also influenced by a few other factors and programmes. Firstly, access was "enhanced by the development of junior/community colleges, as well as by the national advocacy of several professional adult groups, including the Association of University and Evening Colleges (precursor to Association for Continuing Higher Education ACHE) and its member activities" (Kasworm, 2018, p.78). Secondly, in the 1970s women's movement advocating for women's special programmes provided innovative ways of access and support including competency-based learning design in addition to prior learning assessment. Finally, there was the development of Defence Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) and College Level Examination Program (CLEP) which also carried out other unconventional forms of university access for mature-age students (Kasworm, 2018, p. 79).

In Europe, on the other hand, the Bologna Process "has brought many changes to higher education institutions. One of these changes refers to a law that enables mature students (23 years and older) to gain special access to higher education, considering their professional experience and other biographical elements" (Fragoso, *et al.*, 2013, p. 6). Kasworm (2008) adds that the Labour party in the UK made it possible for government-sponsored programmes

and policies. These programmes and policies proposed how access to higher education for adult students can be expanded to include students identified as underrepresented and how a system of education for all can be realised (Kasworm, 2008).

In addition, the UK also saw a few combined factors which stimulated the growth of mature-age students in institutions of higher learning. These factors according to Kasworm (2008, p. 30) included: "the decreasing birth rate in the late 1970s forced both government and educational institutions to look at other ways of maintaining recruitment, a mixture of economic necessity and social justice arguments have been advanced to support a change in government attitude towards adult entry to higher education." The other factor was adult unemployment and a massive restructuring of the industrial sector which required workers to re-skill themselves for future employment, and the requirement for education and training to respond to the demands of the economy". As a result, access courses have been developed within further education colleges, for people identified as "disadvantaged, non-traditional, over 21 years of age, female and minority ethnics" (Bowl, 2001, p. 142).

Access to higher education by non-traditional students has been made possible by a number of institutional and government interventions to make higher education accessible to the masses including mature-aged adults. For example, Essack (2010, p. 17) when analysing the participation rates in Sub-Saharan Africa, points out that "access to higher education for mature students progressed to the status of an equal right, where demographic economic, political and ideological imperatives have influenced the massification of higher education such that it represents national diversity". Essack further points out that higher education has been made accessible to large numbers of the population irrespective of socio-economic and educational status, ultimately resulting in equity or equality of opportunity and providing equal opportunity of access to a variety of academic fields and disciplines and to postgraduate education.

In Namibia, the University of Namibia (UNAM) for example, employs the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process as an alternative mode of admission for candidates to gain access to UNAM's academic programmes. RPL aims to provide (especially adult learners) with an opportunity to have their competencies, skills and knowledge gained through non-certificated learning contexts recognised and assessed for admission. RPL is located within the broader context of the National Policy on RPL, the UNAM's Act 18 of 1992 and UNAM's vision of driving towards a knowledge-based economy, economic growth and improved quality of life (UNAM, 2020). In addition to RPL, UNAM employs a mature age entry scheme with the aim

of providing mature students with access to higher education. The Mature Age Entry Scheme is another alternative admission route used by UNAM for prospective students not in possession of a high school certificate or for those with a high school certificate who do not fulfil the minimum admission criteria based on high school grades (UNAM, 2020).

2.4. Motivation for Participating in Higher Education

Adults participate in learning and education for myriad reasons which, according to Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007), are complex and subject to change. In their study to examine motivation of mature students in the UK, Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 597) found that "students' motives were generally complex and multiple, and sometimes varied at different stages in their lives". Motivations are inextricably linked to the students' identities: "Who they think they are and who they think they may become" (p. 599). An example of this is when students enrol in a course to compensate for past academic failures, or to prove to themselves (or to others) that they have the ability to succeed. In their recent study on the "learning conceptions and priorities of adults" in engineering students at three universities in Ghana, Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe (2018) also found that "motivation, programme relevance, technology application and employability skills provide a strong framing for elucidating adult learning priorities in higher education" (p.16).

Motivation, according to Merriam *et al.* (2007) consists of three orientations to learning. These are goal-oriented learners, who enrol in education to achieve a set goal; activity-orientated learners, who participate for the sake of the activity itself and for social engagement; and learning-oriented learners who enrol in education to seek knowledge for its own sake (2007, p. 64). Merriam *et al.* (2007) also provide seven factors for why adults participate in learning opportunities: "communication improvement of verbal and written skills; social contract" whereby they try to meet people to make friends and connect with others; "professional advancement which is to improve one's job status or moving to a better one; family togetherness, concerned with bridging generation gaps and improving relationships in families; social stimulation, meaning escaping boredom; and cognitive interest, seeking knowledge for its own sake" (p.64). Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe (2018) also provide six major factors which, according to them, affect motivation of adult learners, these are: "attitudes, needs, stimulation, emotion, competence and reinforcement" (p.16).

Motivation for mature-age adult learners to enrol and participate in higher education can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Swain and Hammond (2011) believe extrinsic motivation is that which is closely related to the notion of the utility value of the task. It is the kind which is said to be instrumental and happens when we are motivated to take part in an activity in order to avoid punishment or gain rewards (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Mature-age learners may be extrinsically motivated, for example, "to gain a recognised qualification, increase future employment options and opportunities, new job/career change, improvement of current job, to enable further study and to gain specific skills" (Swain & Hammond, 2011, p. 599).

On the other hand, intrinsic motivation is described as "the enjoyment the individual gets from performing the activity or the subjective interest the individual has in the subject" (Swain & Hammond, 2011, p.594). Intrinsic motivation involves engaging in a behaviour because it is personally rewarding rather than participating in an activity for its own sake or gaining external rewards. According to Swain and Hammond, the following examples indicate intrinsic motivation: to pursue interest in the subject, to do something different, proving to self and/or to others, enjoyment, to be in a stimulating environment, wanting to study and to do something intellectual (2011, p. 599).

The literature also provides a plethora of reasons why mature-age students return or take up higher education at a professional level and personal or convenient level. Firstly, Milheim (2005) indicate that poor job markets have forced workers of this day and age to look for new ways of remaining marketable and competitive. As a result, many are choosing to return to school to obtain higher qualifications as this allows them to remain competitive. This Milheim adds, "provide a foundation on which to build a career that allows opportunity to transition into other fields, rather than remaining stuck on one career path" (p.120). Secondly, employers are moving toward "downsizing and rightsizing" this is resulting in a need for workers to rethink their careers (Milheim, 2005). At personal levels are reasons such as "study once children are older, divorce situations, or an opportunity to finish interrupted education, employers require continued skills development as a lifelong learning policy" (p. 123). It is thus important that in an increasingly changing economic and technological environment, lifelong learning has societal and individual returns.

Hardin (2008) posits that many adult learners in the US pursue their first postsecondary education with the goal of earning an associate or bachelor's degree. Most adult students will choose to enrol in community colleges for their educational experience, as "community

colleges provide the access, affordability, and convenience adults require" (Hardin, 2008, p.49). As a result, "more than half of community college students in the US are adult students" (Frey, 2011, p. 49). On the other hand, some adults already possess a college degree and are returning to higher education to change careers or strengthen their work skills. Hardin (2008) also indicates that as they retire, baby boomers return to university to fulfil long held dreams of obtaining first or advanced degrees.

According to Saddler and Sundén (2020, p. 333), the decision for mature-age students to "transition into higher education is not a straightforward matter", and many students are not always happy in making those decisions. Narratives show that adults begin to consider taking up higher education in parallel with acknowledging the need for a reinterpretation of past experiences (Saddler & Sundén, p. 337). In their study, participants were asked to explain how they had reached the decision to enrol at university; all of them explained that their decision was connected to "specific life-events that were characterised by high levels of change and upheaval" (Saddler & Sundén, p. 337). "A common denominator was the perception that changes to participants' views of themselves, other people and the future laid the ground for their decision to apply to university" (Saddler & Sundén, 2020, p. 337).

Ultimately, the understanding of what motivates mature-age students in seeking enrolment at higher education institutions can assist institutions and their administrators in "identifying and meeting the needs of a wide spectrum of learners relative to program content, as well as the time, duration, and location of related activities" (Merriam *et al.*, 2007 p. 65). Understanding what motivates mature-age students to take up higher education is crucial in my own research. Firstly, the research seeks to uncover what motivated their application to the university for an undergraduate program instead of other universities and programs or courses. Secondly, the research seeks to find out if their motivation (extrinsic or intrinsic) has an influence on how they engage faculty members, courses or subjects, other students and the university's support services. Finally, I hoped to find out if their motivation has changed in any way during the course of their studies.

2.5. Barriers in Higher Education

For mature-age students the decision to enrol in higher education or any programme for that matter is usually not an easy one, given their multiple roles and responsibilities. This is exacerbated even further by numerous barriers which they have to consider or experience.

Adult students face situational (also referred to as external) and psychological (internal or dispositional) barriers and many studies have identified lack of time and financial resources to be the most common barriers to adults in higher education or any kind of education for that matter (Bowl 2001, Fragoso *et al.*, 2013, Merriam *et al.*, 2007, Richardson & King, 1998). Situational barriers are those factors that hinder participation which one has no control over. According to Hardin (2008, p. 52), situational barriers common to adult students are costs of the programme, "role conflicts, time management issues, family and work problems and logistics". Hardin also believes that situational barriers cannot be dealt with by the college or university because they are unique to the individual student.

Psychological or internal barriers, on the other hand, are what Merriam *et al.* (2007, p. 66) describe as reflecting personal attitudes, for example thinking that one is too old to study. Hardin (2008) and Fragoso *et al.* (2013) believe that these kinds of barriers include inadequacies in coping skills, self-confidence and self-image, anxiety about schooling arising from previous experiences, and feeling negative about outcomes. They argue that these barriers initially stem from mature-age students' academic background. A few adults experience difficulty due to a lack of exposure to the academic environment and the prolonged gap after high school means they lack academic skills they need for university (Hardin, 2008).

Bowl (2001) identifies lack of family information and support. Those whose are first generation students seemed to be at a particular disadvantage. Bowl's study also revealed that women experienced this barrier more than their male counterparts, because they had to become economically active as soon as possible, to improve the family's economic situation.

Furthermore, Fragoso *et al.*, (2013) identify balancing family or professional life with academic life as one of the main barriers that students encounter in their transition to higher education. This barrier reflects the incompatibility between the demands of paid work and academic commitments. Essentially, this factor, I believe, is based on time management and is also related to adult students' energy levels and focus. These difficulties are more intense when students live far away from the university as well as when they have parenting roles. Also related to family issues, a third barrier that adult students experience involves a process termed the "double transition" (Fragoso *et al.*., 2013). In addition to the changes they themselves undergo, their children concurrently go through educational transitions and these transitions give them a sense of guilt when their children suffer in their absence. This mechanism

according to Fragoso *et al.*, (2013 p. 9) is powerful enough to lead them to consider withdrawing from higher education.

A more recent barrier in higher education which is not only experienced by mature-age students is the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Rule (2021) students, especially those in the international context, have been restricted from campus and restricted from leaving campus if they are already there. Rule further points out that COVID-19 "has prevented scholars and students from inhabiting each other's geographical, social and cultural spaces, and by extension the potential learnings and transformations that result from contact and interaction" (2021, p.1). Rule (2021) also points out that the psychological impact of Covid-19 and its associated lockdowns have affected students' experiences of education in the form of loneliness, isolation, and depression. This according to him has even more far-reaching consequences for especially mature-age female students who have juggle the balls of housework, income generation, home schooling and health concerns, among others, with their academic work (p. 4).

Furthermore, another important barrier to higher education is pedagogy. This pertains to the methods of instruction and organization of learning, evaluation or assessment and feedback as provided by faculty. Haskell (2001) supports the notion that adults respond better to active learning and teaching strategies: active learning is considered more engaging, and typically affords deeper interaction with the content, which itself is thought to increase learning transfer. Lee and Kahnweiler cited in Furnman and Sibthorp (2013) emphasise that educators need to provide quality feedback to enhance the transfer of knowledge and skills. Hence the need for the educator to provide continuous quality feedback on activities to allow students to share experiences throughout their studies.

Warren (1995) points out that evaluation and reflection are crucial components of learning and the educators must ensure that feedback and debriefing sessions occur during and after the classes and activities. Therefore, reducing barriers in education for adult students means "creating new roles for faculty including: managing and facilitating student learning" and not just utilizing the lecture methods (Milheim, 2005, p.123). Adult students are said to desire course work that has practical applications (Milheim, 2005). She suggests the following to be done to ease discomfort for mature-age students enrolling at higher education institutions:

- "Accessible registration procedures allowing simple course registration. This includes providing an on-site counsellor at designated times in the evening or weekends prior to the start of the semester to assist with enrolment issues" (p.123).

- Continuous tutorials on how to use institutions portal and websites. Now more than ever (especially given the context of Covid-19) students are required to use the universities portal to access grades, enrol and pay bills. "This can be intimidating to individuals who are not familiar with the use of the internet (p.123). And as more students stay at home and study via portals and virtual platforms, "concerns arise regarding their orientation, acculturation and continuing support" (Rule, 2021, p. 2).

- Campus tours, orientations of the students to the library, cafeterias, parking procedures and the campus bookstore.

Finally, it can therefore be argued that, "although adult students encounter a number of barriers to higher education, they are capable of more effective and elaborate learning than younger students, because they are likely to be far more adept at examining and exploring their prior experience in order to make sense of new information and new situations" (Richardson & King, 1998, p. 69). Therefore, "adult students facing such barriers need services that will smooth their academic adjustment by allowing them to focus on their role as a student" (Hardin, 2008, p. 52).

This research will also contribute to the understanding of what hinders participation in higher education by mature-age students. Firstly, the research sought to uncover what the situational barriers are in terms of whether students had any financial difficulty in paying for their studies. Secondly, the study examined the teaching methods and strategies, including whether the feedback provided is favourable or not. Finally, the research looked into the perceived effectiveness of support services to discover if these are also a contributing factor to participation and retention.

2.6. Retention and Success

Do mature-age students stay and successfully complete their studies after enrolling in higher education? The answer to this question is not a very straightforward one. This is because adult students often go through an "identity crisis as they enrol or re-enrol in college" (Hardin, 2008, p. 53). Dill and Henley (1998) point out that mature students do not enjoy going to class and

spending time with friends and class mates because they are juggling between roles and that there is limited tine for class and extracurricular activities. For example, in their study on analysing the relationship between the quality of university experience during their first year and the rest of their studies, by differentiating between traditional to non-traditional students, Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) found that employment can increase the chances of university students dropping out after completing their first year. Pearson (2019) concurs that work adds a number of stressors which result in a lack of persistence among mature age students.

Despite these struggles, many studies have reported a high success rate for mature adult students. This, according to Dill and Henley (1998) is because of the "greater self-complexity and more varied roles" mature-age students have, and thus "mature age students experienced less anxiety related to the successful performance of the specific role of students" (p. 30). According to them, the mature students may be cushioning themselves from stressful academic events by gaining high self-appraisal in other roles, such as that of a spouse, parent, or role in employment. Kasworm (2008) actually suggests that mature-age students academically perform well and, in some cases, better that the traditional younger students in terms of Grade Point Average (GPA) (p. 82). Pearson (2019) also found that students with a "greater sense of self-efficacy, which is a belief in their ability to influence outcomes", are more likely to be successful (p.15).

The literature on student retention and success is rich with information on student interaction and engagement, which suggests that the more the student is engaged and interacts with others the likelier they are to successfully complete their studies. Empirical evidence currently, is in agreement with the proposition that "the degree of a student's social integration in the campus community influences the level of commitment during their academic journey and thus the likelihood of successfully completing that journey" (Braxton & Hirschey, 2004, p 70). They also argue that there currently no evidence to suggest that mature student's social integration influences the commitment to their studies.

Finances can make or break students' persistence. Pearson (2019) indicates that worries about how to access finances to pay for ones' studies due to levels of income is a negative factor in adult students' persistence. On the other hand, receiving some kind of financial aid or having a higher level of income is generally associated with retention and success among mature-age students.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that retention and success among mature aged students is better than their younger counterparts, despite the challenges and level of integration. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011, p. 36) suggest that for mature-age adult students, "the key to success in academia is not in developing their own social identity in the new learning community, but in striking a balance between their academic and external commitments that enables them to reach a level of engagement sufficient to achieve academic success". In addition, Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011 & Kasworm, 2008) found that mature-age students take the informal contacts and relationships with faculty members more seriously than the formal teaching encounters and these have a much stronger influence on their learning and university experiences. In most cases the classroom is said to be used only as an environment to develop their interaction with peers and faculty to improve their learning (Graham & Donaldson, 1996; Kasworm, 2003, 2005) due to their limited time on campus.

In a study done in the UK to examine the experiences of non-traditional students, Merrill (2015) found interesting stories of mature aged students relating to retention and withdrawal. For example, one student "lacked confidence as a learner and was overwhelmed by the symbolic and intellectual capitals of the elite university" (p. 1868). The need for various forms of support was a significant factor in their stories. Lecturer support and encouragement were important in enabling students to continue with their studies and succeed. It is argued that for adults to persist, they need to be surrounded by encouragement and support from family and friends (Pearson, 2019). Such support boosts "the learning confidence of the students" (Merrill, 2015, p. 1807).

The provision of feedback on work was is also an important aspect of the support process and is said to be leading to persistence and success. Merrill (2015, p. 1870) additionally found that "making adult students feel welcomed in an environment which is dominated by younger students" also leads to retention. In the same study, peer support was also emphasized to be very essential in helping mature-age students make sense of the academic language and culture and this would include helping each other understand written materials as well as providing moral support (Merrill, 2015). It can also include financial support, counselling, child care and specialist support including help for those who are not confident enough using information technologies (such as the internet and university portals), and information resources centres (Field & Kurantowicz, 2014)

Furthermore, within the literature on student retention in international higher education discourse, a prominent theoretical framework is the interactionist theory by Vince Tinto. His theory, in its different revisions, identifies the main predictive factor in students' retention and success as what he terms the "level of integration" (Tinto 1975). Tinto argues that when students reach this level, they become an integral part of the social and institutional context of the university. Tinto posits that students' intentions as well as their motivation are inherently tied to their persistence. Student involvement in the classroom is thus important to student retention because the classroom is, for many students, the one place, perhaps only place, where they meet each other. This increases students' likelihood of persisting, because it enables students to develop a support network within the larger community, one that helps students to bond to the institution.

Tinto's interactionist approach stresses that "retention is achieved when a student is committed and integrated into the institution". He identified five factors which he argues promote retention– feedback, support, involvement, expectations and learning – and simply asserts that "students who learn are students who stay" (Tinto 2003, p.3).

However, Tinto's approach, however, fails to take into account a student's socio-economic and cultural background. His critics point out that "adult students often experience external personal and structural problems, such as lack of finances or health problems, so that even if they are students who learn, if the external problems become too severe, they may have to leave, although not out of choice" (Kumanda, Albondiga & Mapfumo, 2017, p. 8784). In addition, Tinto's theory also supposes that students have to fit-in and adapt to the institution's culture rather than universities adjusting to the needs of a diverse student population in a mass-based system. This fails to acknowledge that students, especially mature-aged students, face situational barriers such as role conflicts, lack of time, family and work issue (Hardin, 2008).

Furthermore, a few authors have thus provided a number of recommendations which would help mature students to cope with the discussed challenges in higher education. According to Knowles (1984) mature aged learners do recognise and appreciate good teaching. They admire facilitators instead of instructors or resource person rather than lecturer or grader (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Adult students want to feel part of the university and be respected and accepted. Therefore, institutions need to recognise this if they genuinely want to recruit, engage, retain and reward mature aged students and should begin to change their own habits

and make higher education "a more accessible and representative place and space for such students" (Dill and Henley 1998, p. 26).

Finally, re-entry support and guidance and induction programmes also enhance the learning experiences and adjustment to university life, and thus need to listen to the voices of students especially mature age student and that institutions should understand that when students withdraw it should not just be seen as failure process or an economic cost to the university (Merrill 2015).

This research explores the topic of retention and success by analysing how, if at all, factors such as teaching and learning strategies used by the faculty enable students to have a good learning experience and thus continue their studies. The research also looked into academic and peer support and how necessary these are in supporting mature-age students' retention and success. Finally, because mature-age students are goal-oriented and relevancy oriented, meaning they know exactly upon enrolment at university what they wish to accomplish, the research investigated how students view the curriculum design and how relevant the course content is to their educational goals.

2.7. Theories of and Approaches to Learning

There are a number of approaches and theories of learning framing the basis of this study. Since the study was on mature age adult learners, I believe it is important to highlight the adult learning approaches and theories particularly relevant to mature-age students in higher education. By highlighting these theories, I hoped to develop an understanding and bring to light how the teaching and the learning experiences of mature-age students can be enhanced, if they are to have a better university and learning experience. These approaches and theories of learning relevant to adult or mature-age students are experiential learning theory, andragogy, and transformative learning. Others include interactionist theory and integration by Vince Tinto, as well as connectivism and constructivism.

Learning is defined as a process that changes a person's behaviour permanently as a result of an experience. The process also focuses on what goes on when there is learning taking place (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). For many years, learning theorists have come up with different explanations about what happens when learning takes place. Furthermore, and in agreement with concepts foregrounded through various constructivist approaches, Mezirow (1995) defines learning as a process of meaning-making. The theorists' explanations are organised in

what Merriam and Caffarella (1991) called orientations, which are the humanist, behaviourist, cognitive and social.

Learning experience on the other hand, refers to any interaction, formal, non-formal or informal in which learning takes place, whether it occurs in traditional academic settings such as universities or settings which are more unconventional such as workplace or service learning or whether it includes traditional educational methods such as lecturing or more modern methods such as TV or games. "Learning experience is often used to denote the goal of an educational interaction learning rather than where it is taking place of how it is conducted" (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

As suggested by Mezirow (1995) the learning experience of students especially the mature-aged student can and needs to be enhanced for them to make meaning of their learning; the learning conceptions and priorities of adult learners in universities are essential to explicating the meaning adults make to teaching and learning processes as well as their knowledge and skills development (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2018). Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe (2018) believe that "adult learning priorities are shaped by social, environmental and institutional factors and are essential in developing the knowledge and skills of matured –age students in universities" (p. 4).

The constructivist theory explicates how adult learners integrate new knowledge and accumulated experiences over a period of time, and at the same time, making meaning of what they learn (Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe, 2018 & Mezirow, 1995). Essack (2010, p. 22) explains that constructivism, which "promotes learning and investigation within authentic contexts, fosters the development of student responsibility, initiative, decision-making" uses dynamic, interdisciplinary, generative learning activities. This, he argues, facilitates critical thinking process to assist students to "develop comprehensive and complex knowledge structures, and evaluates student progress in content and learning skills within authentic contexts using real life examples" (Essack, 2010, p. 22). Furthermore, the constructivist theory, as well as andragogy promotes the importance of teaching and learning rules and procedures for organizing learning situations in a flexible way that allows mature-age learners cope with their work and life demand (Knowles, 1996).

Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe (2018, p. 15) also argue that "practical application of the theories learnt and consistent feedback mechanisms are particularly important in the

teaching and learning processes" of mature-age students at universities. What this means is that through "hands on application of the theories they learn and the incorporation of their experiences in the learning processes, they develop their conceptions of learning which also shapes their knowledge and skills development" (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2018, p. 15). The development of conceptions of learning is however, "driven by social factors that influence educational systems across different countries" (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2018, p. 5). In addition, the culture of the social group influences its learning conceptions (Jarvis, 1985). Therefore, "creating a flexible mode of teaching and learning for adult learners must provide relevant input in the development and actualisation of their learning activities" (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2018, p.15).

2.7.1. Andragogy

Developed and defined by Malcolm Knowles in America in the 20th century, andragogy has been one of the significant theories on adult learning. Knowles's work was significant in reorienting adult educators from sentiments of "educating adults" to helping adults learn (Tannehill, 2009). Knowles defined the term as the "art and science of helping adults learn" (1980, p.43). Although seen and argued to be more a number of assumptions about learning that act as a foundation for theorising adult learning (Merriam, 2001), it remains the most learner-centred form or approach to adult educational programmes (Merriam, 2001 & Tannehill, 2009).

Smith (2002), on the other hand, believes that it's actually more of an attempt to build a theory of adult learning which is borne out of the characteristics of adult learners. According to Knowles (1980) there are five assumptions fundamental to this theory. They are: (1) adults are people who have an independent self-concept and are capable of directing their own learning; (2) adults have over their lifespan accumulated a wealth of life experiences that are a great resource for learning; (3) adult learners have learning needs closely related to their changing social roles and responsibilities; (4) they are problem-centred and interested in immediate application of knowledge and skills gained from a programme; (5) they are motivated to learn by internal forces rather than external factors.

Moreover, when trying to explain the characteristics of adult learners Knowles since adult learners have a degree of autonomy and are self-directed, they need to take charge of their own learning and should be actively involved in it (Bash, 2003). In the case of mature-age students

at universities, this would include being involved in the planning and design of their curriculum or course and content selection. This research thus intends to investigate this aspect, by asking participants what their views are regarding course content and how relevant and up-to-date it is. In addition, mature-age students have accumulated a wealth of life experiences and knowledge from activities such as work, other interests, family roles and responsibilities and previous educational experiences (Bash, 2003). These experiences can be of great value to the learning process and should actually form the basis of any of their learning activity. It is therefore important for the educators or facilitators to acknowledge their experiences because when their experience is not valued, they feel rejected as persons (Knowles, 1980).

Additionally, andragogy's proposition is that mature-age students are goal and relevancy oriented, they know exactly upon enrolment at a university what they wish to accomplish. For adults, if learning is to be of value it should be directly connected to a particular aspect of their life such as work (Bash, 2003) Adult students are said to be practical and the knowledge gained should not just be for the sake of having it. Mature-age learners also express the need to be shown respect, based upon their experience and understanding, and thus they expect to be treated as equals and assume that they will be allowed to voice their opinions freely in class (Bash, 2003). Bash also point out that adults are more assertive than their younger counterparts and when they perceive that they are not respected enough, they will act upon those perceptions (Bash, 2003).

Finally, the concept of helping adults to learn requires an understanding of much more than the learning process. In order to create a comprehensive learning experience for mature-age students at universities, "it is necessary to understand how adults learn, what they are interested in learning and where they are most likely to learn better" (Merriam, 1993, p. 23).

One of the most prominent critiques of andragogy as an attempt to theorise adult learning is its context-free approach. This is largely because it emerged out of North America in the late 1960s when the value of learning was placed more on the individual than the collective or contextual factors (Merriam, 2001). According to Merriam, Knowles's idea of andragogy, which portray the individual learner as autonomous, free and growth-oriented, fails to acknowledge how culture and society shape every person's learning process (2001). The other critique worth noting and ongoing is whether andragogy is a theory at all or merely assumptions about learning and that these assumptions are to a large extent characteristic of adults as

learners (Hartree, 1984). Merriam (2001) argues, for example, that some adults are dependent on the teacher, while some children learn independently of the teachers.

2.7.2. Self-directed Learning

After making the five assumptions about how adults learn, which helped form the basis of andragogy (Grover, Miller, Swearingen and Wood, 2014) Knowles discovered that adults are inherently independent and self-directing. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007, p. 110) describe self-directed learning (SDL) as "a process of learning in which people take the primary initiative for planning, carrying out and evaluating their own learning experience". In addition to taking the initiative, planning and evaluating their own learning, Knowles (1975) initially provided that the process needs to "include learners in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes" (. p. 18).

Furthermore, a number of models of self-directed learning have also been developed. I will describe them here briefly. Merriam *et al.* (2007) identified three principal categories into which these models fall: linear, interactive, and instructional. In early models like those proposed by Tough (1971) and Knowles (1975) "self-directed learning was a linear process containing a series of steps toward a learning goal" (p.111). There are three learning goals as described by Merriam (2001, p. 9). The first one is "the development of the learner's capacity to be self-directed, which includes accepting responsibility for their own learning and being a proactive learner. The second goal is "fostering transformational learning (which will be discussed later in detail)". The last goal according to Merriam (2001, p.9) is that self-directed learning should foster "emancipatory learning and social action". This means that mature-age students should be able to use the knowledge and skills gained as a result of learning to transform social and political systems. Subsequent models proposed by Spear (1988) Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) and Garrison (1997) were "more interactive in design and incorporated both the context and the nature of the learning process" (Merriam *et al*, 2007, p.112).

The other significant models of self-directed learning are the instructional models of self-directed learning which are proposed to apply self-directed learning principles to educational environments while considering the levels of learner self-direction (Grover, Miller, Swearingen & Wood, 2014). Grow also suggested the "Staged Self-Directed Learning model" is perhaps the best-known instructional model (1991). Grow (1991) noted, "Students have varying

abilities to respond to teaching that requires them to be self-directing" (p. 126). Building on this insight, his model describes four stages for learners, ranging from dependent to self-directed, and proposes that the "teacher's purpose is to match the learner's stage of self-direction and prepare the learner to advance to higher stages" (p. 129). As they advance through the stages, learners are given progressively more choice or control within instructional situations (Grow, 1991).

There are certain conditions however that need to be in place for self-directed learning as a method to be effective enough. The first is provided by Brookfield (1993) who believes that there must be a political condition. It is argued that when learners are given control over educational decisions, this need to be consistent throughout the self-directed learning process. Merriam *et al.*, (2007) also asserts that this condition should also be reflected in the educational institution's culture. The second condition that needs to be in place for self-directed learning to strive is access to resources by mature-age students. Brookfield (1993) explains that "any form of supposedly self-directed initiatives has floundered because in attempting to assume control over students' learning, they found themselves in the invidious position of being denied the resources to exercise that control properly" (cited in Merriam, 2001, p 10) .

This therefore calls on educators and educational institutions to provide more access to resources in order for mature-age students to exercise better control over their learning (Merriam *et al.*, 2007).

Like andragogy, self-directed learning has also received wide criticism. Collins (1988) points out that self-directed learning strategies were pointing adult learners into conforming to what educational institutions are interested in. Brookfield (1994) adds that the discourse of self-directed learning became a power-knowledge issue which, according to him puts adults as learners in a regulated and controlled environment.

2.7.3. Experiential Learning

Simply put, experiential learning is a particular form of learning stemming from life experiences and is often differentiated from lecture and classroom learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Lewis and William (1994) also define experiential learning as learning by doing, however they add reflection as an important aspect of the theory. To them, experiential education immerses learners in an experience and then encourages them to reflect on the experience to develop new skills, attitudes and/or new ways of thinking (cited in Schwartz,

2012). Joplin (1995) explains that all learning is actually experiential: every time a person learns, he or she must experience and identify the subject and interact with and form a personal relationship with it. Experiential education programmes start with two responsibilities: to provide the learner with an experience and to facilitate a reflection on the experience provided. The reflection, according to Joplin, is an important process because it turns experience into a meaningful experiential education as well as a meaningful learning experience.

Experiential learning theory, according to Kolb (1984) provides a fundamentally different view of learning process from those of behavioural, liberal and traditional theories of learning, which are based on learning as formal, institutional, as an intellectual development and as a process association, where the educator is the expert, sets objectives, and controls and directs the learning process. This theory uses elements of action, reflection and transfer (Beard & Wilson, 2002). Mature-age students have much more and a different quality of experience (Knowles, 2005). What differentiates experiential learning from other theories of learning is the role that experience plays in the learning process. Experiential learning theory is relevant to mature-age student's learning, as all of them have prior knowledge and experience of both learning and life. It is therefore important to have a thorough understanding of how adults learn, whereby, understanding mature-age students by taking a holistic view and recognising the importance of their prior experience.

Kolb (1984) brought forth the idea that experiential learning is not just a set of educational methods but a statement of fact. He based his argument on the assessment of prior experience-based learning in order to grant academic credits for degree programmes at universities or certification for licensing in trades and professions. Willingham *et al.* (1977, cited in Kolb, 1984) also talked about recognition of prior learning as a link between formal education and adult life, which they regard as the integration of education and work for recognising the validity of all learning, relevant to college degrees and fostering recurrent education. My study will also look into the mature-age student's experience and will determine how they gained admissions and whether their admission was based on their prior experience.

Reflection is one of the crucial elements in the experiential learning approach and in discussing this Chapman, McPhee and Proudman (1995) argue that piling one experience on top of the other without reflecting on it leads to rote learning. The constructivist approach also focuses on reflecting on people with concrete experiences, and how they reflect on them and construct new knowledge as a result of these reflections. There is a need therefore to mix experience with

associated content and guided reflection which allows learners to bring the theory to life and gain valuable insights about themselves and their interaction with the world.

The literature highlights that the educator of experiential learning plays multiple roles, which are more facilitative in nature. What all this means for lecturers and facilitators in adopting experiential learning theory and using its approaches, methods and techniques is the provision of feedback. Lee and Kahnweiler, cited in Furnman & Sibthorp, 2013) emphasise that educators need to provide quality feedback to enhance the transfer of knowledge and skills. Hence the need for the educator to provide continuous quality feedback on activities and presentations to allow learners to share experiences throughout any experiential learning programme or activity. Warren (1995) points out that evaluation and reflection are crucial components of experiential learning; the educator must ensure that feedback and debriefing sessions occur during and after the sessions. This study is going to explore the subject of feedback by asking participants how important feedback is to them, how useful they find it and the kinds of feedback provided by faculty.

In addition, the facilitators should encourage learners to share past and projected future experiences with other participants. Based on this approach, the educator should create an environment that is trusting and open.

Furthermore, the role of the educator, according to Merriam *et al.* (2007) is to encourage the students to discuss and reflect on concrete experience in what these authors describe as a trusting and open environment. Passarella and Kolb (2011) argue that faculty need to draw on these modes of concrete experience and reflective observation to help learners get in touch with their own experience and reflect on it in order to make meaning of it. According to Chapman *et al.* (1995) educators should provide opportunities for the students to make sense of their experience and to fit them into their ever-changing views of self and the world.

Another critical role the educator plays in experiential learning is to facilitate making connections (Chapman et al., 1995). They claim that educators must help learners make connections by understanding the point of an experience for it to be educative. Learners are only able to make the connection if the educator guides an effective debriefing group discussion. Additionally, the educator should actively facilitate and maximise learning so that the experience does not become mis-educative and should also allow learners to struggle with the experiences, which in itself becomes a didactic lesson. The educator should be able to play

roles of the mediator, problem poser and coach through the learning process Chapman *et al.* (1995). However, to do this, it is important that the educator is thoroughly knowledgeable of the content and subject area if he or she is to become a resource person. Having a ready repertoire of resources means that the educator can be proactive and positively influence activities.

There are many issues which the experiential learning theory failed to include and/or address. One of those is the role of knowledge that many argue does not acknowledge secondary experience. In Jarvis's review of Kolb's *Adult Learning in the Social Context*, the use of learning styles in experiential learning theory was also not clearly considered. Jarvis claims that individual learning styles were not fixed and varied over time (Dyke 2017). In addition, Jarvis acknowledged that the relationship between knowledge and learning was a strength of Kolb's work. Knowledge is facts, information, and skills acquired by a person through experience and learning. It is therefore important to include the learner's knowledge when embarking on experiential education. The role of knowledge is further emphasised by Jarvis and is closely related to the primary and secondary experience. Experiential learning often refers to learning from a person's primary experience but learning from the secondary experience of others is also common (Dyke, 2009). Therefore, experiential learning is said not to have taken into consideration the secondary experience.

Merriam *et al.* (2007, p. 184) add a critique regarding content, design, and role of the educator in experiential learning. The management of experiential learning interferes with the very essence of the theory that it should liberate and not oppress learners. A good example here is that, in workplaces, experiential learning becomes human capital with economic potential for organisations and minimal attention is given to workers' dignity and freedom. Finally, in relation to the assessment of prior learning, experiential learning is said to control people's lives. For example, in assessing learners' experience to help adults gain credits for admission, institutions of higher learning colour what counts as experience worthy of credits. This is considered demeaning in that it categorises people's experience, implying that not all is worthy (Fenwick cited in Merriam *et al.* 2007, p. 160).

2.7.4. Transformative Learning

Mezirow (1975)'s conceptions of transformative learning theory came out of his qualitative research work in the USA conducted with women returning to college in different re-entry

programmes. These women experienced a re-evaluation of identity as mothers and wives in view of the prospect of an empty nest after their children left home. Mezirow posits that these women experienced a disorienting dilemma, (Mezirow, 1981) and therefore underwent "personal transformation" Mezirow (1978). The disorienting dilemma according to him becomes the catalyst for a transformational learning process. A disorienting dilemma, according to Mezirow (1978) is an acute internal/external personal crisis that leads to reflection and subsequent action. The action in this case is what constitutes an urge to learn and change the status quo. Boud *et al.* (1985, p.19) emphasise that reflection is "an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it. It is this working with experience that is important in learning." Mezirow (2003) maintains that the three types of reflection, namely content, process and premise, are essential components of the transformative learning process.

Transformative learning theory came as a result of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Jack Mezirow's ideas on perspective transformation. These two are the early seminal writers of the transformative theory of learning. Freire (1970) argued that transformative learning is emancipatory and fosters a critical consciousness amongst individuals. Although influenced by Freire, Mezirow refined and introduced transformative learning theory into adult learning and education in 1978.

Transformational learning "produces changes that are more far-reaching and have a significant impact on the learner's subsequent experiences; transformational learning shapes people and makes them different in ways both they and others can recognize" (Clark, 1993, p. 51). It is argued that the impact of education on the adult learner often extends far beyond the acquisition of credits or the advancement of a career and the knowledge acquired through the learning process can act as a springboard for more substantial and internal changes in the adult student (Mezirow, 2000). "Transformational learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove truer or justified to guide action" (Mezirow, 2000, p.8).

In addition, transformative learning is said to be an intensive process that requires seasoned educators and a great deal of support mechanisms (Robertson 1996). The role of the educator in transformative learning spaces is to be a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) who facilitates knowledge through a dialogical approach where learners and knowledge operate in reciprocal

unity (Gravett & Henning, 1998, p.61). An educator must be able to apply a dialogical approach to the learning process skilfully in order to provide learners space to think, reflect and verbalise their points of view in order to bring about new learning and meaning-making (Mezirow, 1995) in a reciprocal way. Because transformation cannot be taught, the role of the educator will be compromised if he or she cannot create a safe space for learners to reflect critically so that transformation can occur (Cranton, 2002). It is crucial for educators to uphold a strong ethical approach to the learning (Mezirow, 1991).

Therefore, and when applying the dialogical learning approach, educators must create co-operative learning climates where learners feel psychologically safe and free to challenge and engage each other respectfully and positively (Reardon, 1999, p.15). These learning spaces can stimulate active learning and assist critical thinking (Boyer 1997, p.24). In the same vein, Brookfield (1987) asserts that educators must be able to encourage the practice of critical thinking and nurture the application of critical questioning techniques.

This application of critical questioning techniques will allow educators access to the learner's existing frame of reference (Mezirow, 1996, p.162). It is an ideal departure point for initiating transformative learning and creating a rich source of learning for themselves well as for the rest of the learners (Tennant, 1991; Vella 1994a; Knowles *et al.*, 1998). However, educators must be aware of the rich diversity that the practice will bring and should show empathy when learners' experiences are scrutinised by others (Tennant, 1991, p.197).

Educators who show empathy in the sharing of learner experience are better positioned to promote learner involvement effectively through the use of a repertoire of strategies such as role-play and group work as suggested by Cranton (1996, 2002). Both Freire (1970) and Hart (1990) claim that such an approach could be useful as a consciousness-raising technique. Moreover, educators must be aware that consciousness-raising can lead to challenging and uncomfortable power dynamics in the group.

The transformative theory has been criticised over the years by different scholars. Cranton (1994) argues that the use of this theory has let to indoctrination and or coercion of learners towards a particular outcome. She argues that educators using this approach need to be seasoned enough if they are to facilitate learning.

According to Clark and Wilson (1991, p. 78) Mezirow's version of the theory appears to be acontextual as Mezirow's research approach was to separate the person from their historical and sociocultural context. This critique is shared by Taylor (1997, 2007, 2011) Baumgartner (2012) and Cranton and Taylor (2012) who indicate that the theory has not dealt with context, relationships and affect. This critique has also given rise to the contention that Mezirow's description of transformational learning excludes the cultural context of transformation because it primarily addresses the individual's critical reflection capacity from a western point of view. Johnson-Barley and Alfred (2006) believe that in a cultural perspective, transformation is considered a way of knowing through context and factors such as gender, power, ethnicity and class, and therefore involves a more collective experience than what Mezirow proposes.

2.8. Conceptual Framework

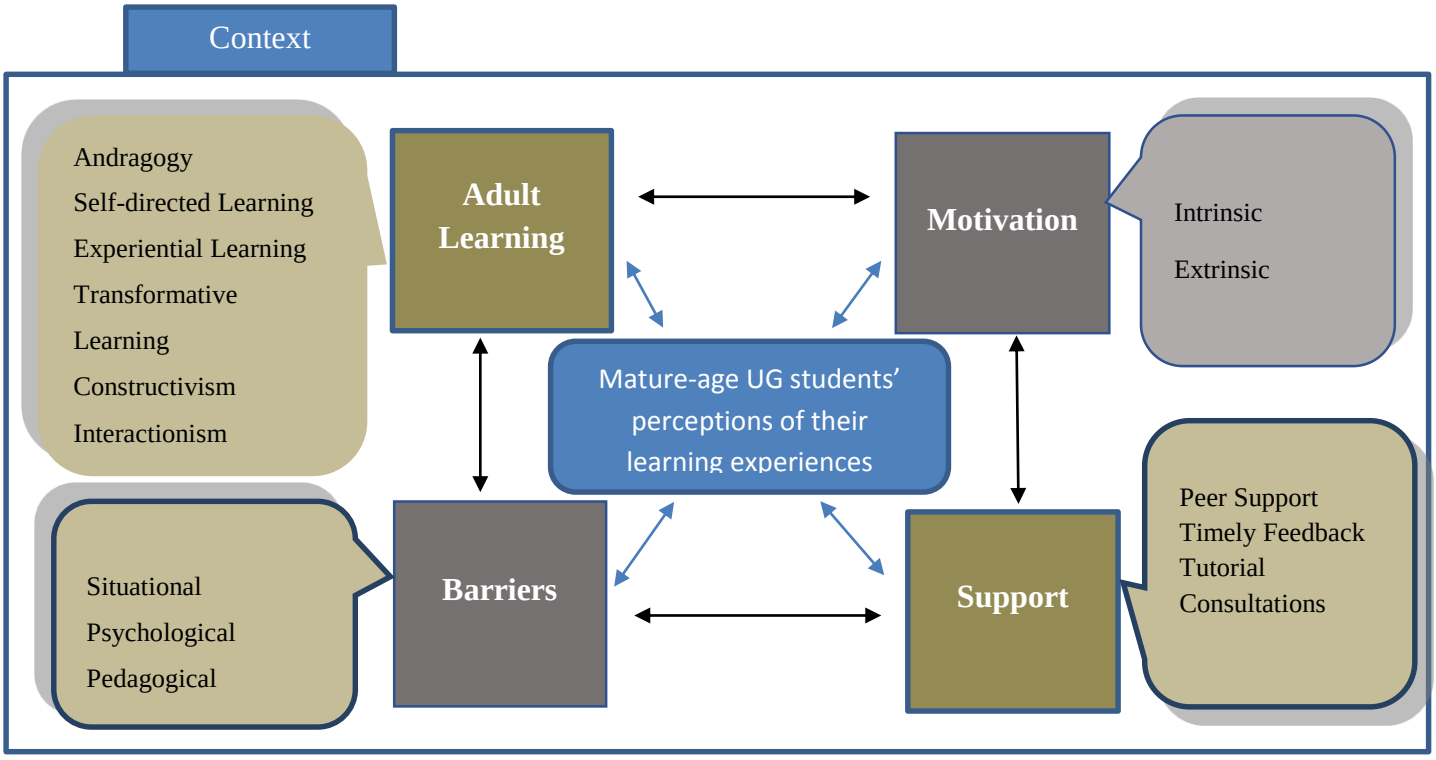

Figure 2.1: A conceptual framework for mature-age students' perceptions of their learning experiences

This is a framework of concepts emerging from the literature which I used to better understand the research questions. I also used this conceptual framework to formulate the main research questions and used it to guide my individual interviews and focus group discussions as data

collection methods. Lastly, I kept these concepts in mind when organising and analysing the data.

My understanding of the perceptions of mature-age students' learning experiences are influenced by adult learning theories. For the purpose of this study, these are andragogy, self-directed learning, experiential learning and transformative learning. The learners' perceptions are also influenced by barriers which can be psychological, for example, thinking that one is too old to study, and situational such as a lack of financial means to pay tuition fees. The learners' perceptions are also influenced by their motivation to participate and learn. As Wlodkowski (1985) points out, adult learners' motivation is a causal factor for learning and it also mediates learning.

Motivation for mature-age adult learners to enrol and participate in higher education can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is that which is closely related to the idea of the "*utility value of the task*" (Swain & Hummond, 2011 p. 593) it also means participating in a programme because it can or it is personally rewarding. Extrinsic motivation occurs when we are motivated to perform a behaviour or engage in an activity in order to avoid punishment or gain rewards.

Support services and their effectiveness in providing a conducive environment for learning and the learning experience also influence mature-age students' experiences. In the context of this study, support in the form of programme such as peer support, timely feedback, tutorial and academic counselling and consultations play a big role in mature-age students' experiences.

Consequently, there is an interaction between barriers, adult learning theories, motivation, and support, as indicated by the two-way arrows in the diagram. For example, timely feedback as a support mechanism or service has a bearing to experiential learning theory as pointed out by Lee and Kahnweiler educators need to provide quality feedback to enhance the transfer of knowledge and skills if coupled with reinforcement opportunities (cited in Furnman & Sibthorp, 2013).

In addition, there is interaction between the theories of adult learning and a barrier such as when lecturers provide limited interaction in class and use a limited number of teaching and learning methods, which can create pedagogical barriers. Such barriers could be reduced or eased by the use of andragogy which stipulates that mature-age adult learners should have a sense of control over their own learning and should be actively involved in the learning process

(Bash, 2003). The appropriate implementation of theories of adult learning will also lead to better motivation. this is as a result of when educational institution implements principles of self-directed learning whereby students plan themselves, carry out and evaluate their own learning experiences Merriam *et al.* (2007). Knowles (1975) also indicates that learners are better motivated when they are responsible for assessing their learning needs, formulating their goals for learning, identifying resources, choosing and implementing their own learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. I therefore believe that when students have more and better support services, they in turn become more motivated to learn and complete their programme of study.

2.9. Summary

This integrative literature review presented a summary of the current state of knowledge on the topic of mature-age adult learners in different regions and contexts (Neuman (2014, p. 127). This literature review identified ideas and thoughts which supports and opposes points of view regarding mature-aged students and to engage these thoughts in my own discussions (Okeke & van Wyk, 2015, p.134). The literature review also highlighted very important approaches and theories particularly relevant to mature-age students in higher education. These are necessary in understanding and bringing to light how the teaching and the learning experiences of mature-age students can be enhanced, if they are to have a better university and learning experience.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the research design and research methods to be used in this study. The chapter describes the research approaches and examines the research population, sample size and sampling techniques. It further identifies the types of data collection instruments which were utilised and the procedures to be employed in data collection are explained. The main purpose of this study was to investigate and explore how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM). This overall purpose includes understanding their attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies as well as the challenges they face during their studies.

Most of the studies carried out to understand students' learning experiences have only looked at the general category of non-traditional students. These include adult and/or mature-age students, disabled students, economically disadvantaged students, immigrants, first generation students etc. (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011, Dill & Henley, 1998, James, 2000, Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992 & Tasso Eira de Aquino *et al.*, 2016). These studies are quantitative in method and compare non-traditional students' experiences and challenges to those of traditional students. Studies which looked at the mature-age students' learning experiences as a category of non-traditional are often survey in nature and utilise mostly questionnaires with structured questions in the research instruments to generate numeric data (Wilson, 1997, Swain & Hammond, 2011, Phillips, 1986 & Graham and Donaldson, 1999). I was of the opinion that looking at mature-age students' experiences of the university needs to go beyond these research designs to qualitatively interpreting their experiences. A qualitative study will add to knowledge of mature-age students' lived experience of studying at a university.

3.2. Research Paradigms

Lather (2006, p. 45) points out that research in education requires a solid base, because capacity issues bring to a deadlock effort to transform educational research into an evidence-based field. She further argues that educational research is mired with qualitative methods and thus there is a need for more training in research methodology (Lather, 2006). In agreeing with Lather, I believed that studies positioned and justified in a specific paradigm will lead to a well-designed and organised inquiry. I was also of the opinion that an adoption of methodologies and methods is largely dependent on paradigm preference and the philosophical world view of a researcher.

Therefore, a holistic understanding of research paradigms and methodologies and methods is needed, especially in educational research so that it can "*contribute to the solutions of educational problems and to provide reliable information about practices that support learning*" (Lather, 2006 p. 46).

A paradigm is defined as a basic belief system and theoretical framework with assumptions or elements about ontology, epistemology, axiology, methodology and methods. In other words, it is my way of understanding the reality of the world and describing a researcher's "worldview" and how to study the world (Rehman & Alharthi 2016, Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). This worldview is the perspective or school of thought, which informs the meaning or interpretation of research data; or, as Lather (1986) explains, a research paradigm innately reflects beliefs about the research world which they live in and want to live in. Paradigms are conceptual lenses through which the author examins the methodological characteristics of their research project to decide on the research methods to be used and how the data will be analysed and interpreted (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

According to Thomas Kuhn (1962) a paradigm is *"a philosophical way of thinking"* and in this case thinking about educational research (cited in Kivinja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 26). The choice of methodology and methods would justify whether what is discovered would constitute truth or simply a set of beliefs. As Lakomski points out, "*the point of preferring one set of methods over another is to believe that the chosen set will lead to knowledge rather than mere belief, opinion, or personal preference*" (1992, p. 193). Paradigms are crucial as they dictate and influence what and how studies should be done, and how the results should be interpreted (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). I argue that paradigm choice also influences how research questions are framed and how research problems are presented and investigated.

There are historically four main research paradigms or worldviews with regards to research: Positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and pragmatism with a number of other paradigms which became prominent more recently such as feminism, poststructuralism, post-positivism and post-humanism. Positivism is a research philosophy which is grounded in the empirical or scientific method of inquiry. According to Bridges (1999) positivism is a philosophical world view or stance to research in which a researcher is collecting data from a perceived external world and recording it in a way that reflects the data, interprets what he or she observes and then relates it back to theory or potentially forms new theory or theories. Kivunja and Kujini (2007) suggest that positivist research *"involves a process of experimentation that is used to*

explore observations and answer questions" (p. 30). Positivism consists of approaches to research based on identifying facts with measurable characteristics (Lather, 2006).

On the other hand, interpretivism, also referred to as the constructivist paradigm, is a philosophical outlook towards research in which the researcher is interested in understanding what Guba and Lincoln refers to as *"the subjective world of human experience"* (cited in Kivunja & Kuyini, 2007, p. 33). This paradigm utilises mostly qualitative methods and gathers qualitative data comprised mostly of text to understand a social phenomenon. A clear contrast to the positivist paradigm is that in interpretivism the researcher is directly involved with participants (at least to some extent) in a personal way (Szyjka, 2012). Interpretivists are post-positivists who believe that research should focus on the constructed world as opposed to the found world.

In addition to the research purpose and the questions which this study aims to answer, it was also critical to position the research in the interpretivist paradigm because this assisted in adopting the right methodology and methods. Good research projects are those done with the right choice of methodology and methods, culminating into a proper design and uncovering knowledge.

I therefore situated the research project within the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm. This is a philosophical outlook toward research in which researchers are interested in understanding the subjective world of human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This paradigm utilises mostly qualitative methods and gathers text data to understand social phenomena. The worldview of an interpretivist researcher assumes that realities are socially constructed, and that individuals are able to construct multiple realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In contrast, the positivist's ontology holds that reality exists objectively and independently of human perception. Interpretivism seeks to discover the "essence" of participants' experiences in a particular context. Such research often asks the question, *"what is it like to have that experience?"* (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017, p. 36). A clear contrast to the positivist paradigm is that the interpretivist researcher is directly involved with participants (at least to some extent) in a personal way (Szyjka, 2012).

3.3. Research Design

I therefore argue that looking at mature-age students' learning experiences at university needs to go beyond quantitative research designs to qualitatively interpret their experiences. With a

qualitative approach to this study, I was able to understand the students learning experience through the students' own eyes, rather than myself, while acknowledging that the researcher always has an influence on the study (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016 p.56). By utilising the interview and focus group methods of data collection as some of the qualitative methods, I hoped to uncover what individual students and students as a group think about their classroom and support services experiences. This also helped me to represent the voices and actual words of the students in the research reports (Okeke & van Wyk, 2015). The benefits of this type of exploratory study are that "attitudes, values, feelings, thoughts and experiences can be recorded with depth and in rich detail" (Roberts, 2011, p.185); this is otherwise not possible with quantitative methods.

This study employed a qualitative research method and an exploratory case study research design. Qualitative research endeavours to understand social phenomena by understanding individual and group perspectives. Patton (2002) suggests that a researcher who utilises a qualitative methodology hopes to understand the perceptions, feelings, and knowledge of participants, nortmally through in-depth, intensive interviewing, and/or observation and analysis of documents.

The current knowledge and understanding of students' learning experiences at most universities in Namibia, and at UNAM, to be specific, is limited to end-of-semester evaluation surveys. These quantitative surveys provide a somewhat very narrowly focused information and understanding of students' learning experiences. These surveys are also very homogeneous in their design and provide generalised understanding of the entire student population. This study moved beyond a quantitative analysis of the students' learning experiences and specifically targets mature-age students.

3.4. Sampling

The population of this study was mature-age students in undergraduate programmes at UNAM, and the study targeted mostly those in their second, third or final year of study. The assumption was that these students have a much more expansive university experience than first year students, and are likely to provide rich data.

To ensure a better understanding of the phenomena, a sample was drawn from across all faculties and departments of the university in order to understand this phenomenon. A selection of a sample that can provide both first-hand and secondary information during the interview

process is critical (Merriam, 1998). The sample consisted of mature-age students as defined by Hardin (2009, p. 52) whose enrolment into higher education is "delayed until adulthood, enrolling part-time, being financially independent and responsible for others", working full-time or having taken study leave, having family and community responsibilities and having academic deficiencies.

I selected 20 mature-age students for the individual interviews through purposive sampling. According to Maree and Petersen (2016) this sample size is sufficient because of the degree of homogeneity of mature-age students with respect to their characteristics. Purposive sampling was the best strategy for this study due to the COVID-19 situation, whereby in-person classes were cancelled and made it difficult for me to go from one class to the next to pick a sample. Maree and Pietersen (2016) define purposive sampling as a method used in special situations where it is done with a specific purpose in mind. The purposive sampling strategy was applied through making appointments with faculty and department administrative staff who assisted me in identifying mature-age students through student records.

After the initial sample I then used other sampling strategies to further find participants who met the inclusion criteria. "These are intensity, network and convenience sampling. Intensity sampling according to Patton (2020, p. 234) "consists of information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely." The network sampling signifies that participants are referred to or named by previous participants in a study (Merriam, 1998). To obtain participants for my study I solicited referrals through friends, acquaintances, and colleagues.

I also used mixed sampling methods for the focus group discussion. This included purposive and network sampling. Purposive sampling, according to Maree and Pietersen (2016, p. 198) is used in special situations where "the sampling is done with a purpose in mind". In this case I purposely selected four students who were part of the interviews that I thought provided much wider responses and could express themselves confidently and 3 students were part of the study as a result of network sampling.

3.5. Data Collection

Before the commencement of data collection, I had to seek permission to conduct research from the University of Namibia's Centre for Research and Publications (CRP) under the office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research Innovation and Development. Permission to collect data was granted on March 12, 2021 with the condition that all interviews and focus groups

were to take place virtually or telephonically. This was to minimise in-person contact with students as stipulated in the COVID-19 regulations of UNAM.

This qualitative study collected data in the form of text, to understand students' experiences and their perceived challenges. I collected data using individual interviews and focus groups to understand the mature-age students' perceptions of their learning experiences. I asked students through individual interviews, what their attitudes were towards the teaching methods, techniques and learning styles. I also asked how they perceived the effectiveness of student support services and what they perceived as challenges during their studies.

3.5.1. Individual Interviews

The semi-structured individual interviews allowed mature-age students to speak freely about their perceptions of their learning experience at the university (Saddler & Sundén, 2020). Virtual individual interviews were essential as they gave me the opportunity to probe the participants and dig deeper into the responses. Individual interviews were vital in providing rich, first-hand, descriptive data which helped me to understand mature-age students' construction of their reality and experience (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). However, it had its limitations: it was time consuming and some participants did not have enough time to answer all questions fully. For example, one interview happened during lunch and the interview went over the one-hour lunch limit and we had to stop. Some participants felt uncomfortable sharing their feelings and views with me. For example, one student did not want to share her age with me. Since the interview took place virtually over the Zoom application, I had issues with broadband whereby the connection kept cutting. This resulted in poor transcription of audio recording to text. Thus, I needed to contact the participants again to verify the information they provided and this was time consuming.

In an effort to specifically select the participants, Firstly, I phoned individuals whom I knew. I also got references from other friends and acquaintances based at the university who knew of potential participants; thereafter I gave them phone calls. The purpose of the initial calls was to carry out a screening process whereby I used an informal interview, to determine if the individual met the criteria for inclusion. Through this informal interview I also solicited demographic information from them. After this initial contact, I sent each of the students who provisionally met the criteria, consent forms to sign and return.

The next step was to arrange a time and date when the interviews would take place. Most interviews took place after hours since most respondents had full-time jobs. All interviews took place via the online Zoom platform as per the university's guidelines of COVID-19 that no in-person meetings or engagements should be held with students or staff.

During the individual interview I thanked the participants for taking time out of their busy schedules and explained issues concerning anonymity and confidentiality. I also informed them that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any given time. I then explained the purpose of the research project and how it would be beneficial to students and the university. I asked about their demographic information, how their studies were financed, what motivated their application. I also asked questions related to their classroom and academic experience, support services and overall university experience (a detailed interview schedule is attached as Appendix 1).

3.5.2. Focus Group Discussions

I also conducted focus group discussions. The focus group discussion was helpful in the sense that participants were be able to interact and build on each other's ideas and views in order to widen the range of responses, providing forgotten details of experiences. It provided an enabling environment for participants who might otherwise have felt uncomfortable with individual interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The focus group is an effective research tool for collecting data especially in education since it provides an opportunity to listen to and learn from the participants (Morgan, 1998). The aim of the focus groups was to provide me with data that gave me insights into the attitudes of the mature-age students, their perceptions of their learning experiences, their motivations, challenges and concerns and opinions (Kingry, Tiende & Friedman, 1990). Unlike the individual interviews, the focus group also allowed participants to interact and respond to each other, and to give me a collective sense of their learning experiences. I was able to generate a much wider discussion with the focus group by asking broader questions about the challenges they faced during their studies, what motivated and continued to motivate them, university and academic experiences. He asked questions such as: why did you choose this specific university among others? what aspects of your learning experience met your expectations? and could you all please describe your experience regarding teaching and learning?

I requested four of the participants who were part of the one-on-one interviews to be part of the focus group. These four provide details of their experiences which I thought were forgotten during the interview stage (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). I also included three participants in the focus group who were not interviewed, and my intention was for them to provide some new data thereby contributing to data balance and credibility. This also provided data authenticity which according to Neuman (2014, p. 218) *is "*offering a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life" from people who experience a phenomenon daily.

Cleaning the data was also time consuming as I had to go over the recording several times to make out what participants were saying. With the focus groups some participants kept dropping out due to network. There was an issue of dominance by some focus group member who said more than others. This was a big challenge because even with multiple attempts to single them out to say something some participants did not have a fair chance to provide their experiences with the group.

During the focus group I welcomed the participants and explained the purpose of the research project and that of the focus group discussions. I also explained what focus groups entail and gave an overview of how the interaction would proceed. He asked question pertaining to their motivation, their university experience, classroom and academic experiences and also provided an open opportunity for any additional information they would like to provide. Appendix 2 provides an outline of the focus groups guiding question.

In conclusion, I thanked the participants for their time and their shared experience and informed them to contact me should they want to provide additional information perhaps forgotten or not clearly provided. All members of the focus group signed a declaration obligating them not to divulge any information from the group.

The next step involved transcribing data. The individual interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim from the audiotapes using online transcribing software called Otter ai. Transcribing was done immediately after each interview and focus group discussions. This allowed me to follow-up on answers which were not clear as students would still have fresh memories of both the individual interview. I then reviewed the transcripts and rearranged what Ouma (2019, p. 5) described as "*the flow of ideas*". He also corrected the grammar, punctuations and typing error caused by the transcribing software.

The table below provides concise descriptions of data collection methods:

Table 3.1: Data collection methods

Research sub-questions	Source of data	Method of data collection	Research instrument
1. What are the factors influencing mature-age students' learning experience in undergraduate programmes?	✚ mature-age students	✚ Individual Interviews ✚ Focus groups	✚ Interview schedule ✚ Focus group schedule
2. What are mature-age student's attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies?	✚ Mature-age Students	✚ Interviews ✚ Focus groups	✚ Interview schedule ✚ Focus group schedule
3. How do mature-age students perceive the effectiveness of student support services?	✚ Mature-age Students	✚ Focus groups ✚ Individual Interview	✚ Interview schedule ✚ Focus group schedule
4. What are the perceived challenges that they face during their studies?	✚ mature-age students	✚ Individual Interviews ✚ Focus groups	✚ Interview schedule ✚ Focus group schedule
5. What sort of support and programmes will assist mature-age students in their academic and vocational success?	✚ mature-age students	✚ Individual Interviews ✚ Focus Groups	✚ Interview schedule ✚ Focus group schedule

3.6. The COVID-19 Factor

Rule (2021) indicates that Covid-19 has affected the ways that postgraduate students conduct their research. I would like to concur with these sentiments given that my research was impacted greatly by COVID-19. He also had to take new Covid-related circumstances into account which led to changing my methods and interview techniques. For example, I had hoped to initially observe classes; however, due to restrictions, I had to conduct virtual interviews and a focus group only. Thus, I had to resubmit my research proposal to the ethics committee, and this caused much delay in the process. Rule (2021) also points out that in educational research classroom observation has become much more difficult or changed in modality as teaching and learning have shifted online.

3.7. Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the individual interviews and focus group discussion was analysed by way of meaning-making which focused on how individuals personally attach meaning to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, cited in Creswell 2016). Meaning making in this case is to determine what an experience means for the students who have experienced it and are able to provide detailed description of it (Creswell 2016, p. 77). For most of the individual interview data, I carried out thematic content analysis. "It is a method for describing data, but it also involves interpretation in the processes of selecting codes and constructing themes" (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 847). "A distinguishing feature of thematic analysis is its flexibility to be used within a wide range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks, and to be applied to a wide range of study questions, designs, and sample sizes" (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 847).

Thematic analysis is an appropriate method of analysis for seeking to understand experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 846). I ascertained themes and sub-themes from the transcribed text that surfaced as being significant in the shared experiences of the students (Okeke & van Wyk, 2015). Since it is designed to search for common or shared meanings, it is less suited for examining unique meanings or experiences from a single person or data item. Finally, because of its relevance to other methods of qualitative research, "the steps of thematic analysis echo those of grounded theory, ethnography, and other qualitative methodologies that also rely on coding and searching data sets for themes as part of their processes" (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p.848).

Through thematic content analysis, this study constructed themes to reframe, reinterpret, and/or connect elements of the data. Thus, themes are not merely organisational tools used to classify and label data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). "While processes of thematic analysis will have me developing organisational and classification labels to describe the data, thematic analysis goes further into the interpretation and data transformation processes" (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p.850).

3.8. Thematic Analysis Process

Firstly, I familiarised myself with the transcribed data from the individual interviews and focus group discussion. This helped me to get what Kiger and Varpio (2020) referred to as a valuable orientation to the raw data. After familiarising myself with the raw data, I then started separating the data using codes to form data clusters for further analysis (Okeke & van Wyk, 2015, p.464). The coding framework was based on a deductive approach to meaning-making. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) a deductive analysis derived themes from predefined theories. These predefined theories are set out in the literature review chapter of this study. I also drew themes from the research questions. A deductive analysis is distinguished from the inductive analysis which purely derives themes identified from the original coded data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

After coding the data, I then started identifying themes through analysing, combining, comparing, and even graphically mapping how codes relate to one another. Themes, according to Okeke and van Wyk (2015, p. 465) are "assertions that have a high degree of generality". After Identifying themes, I then looked at the coded data placed within each theme to ensure proper fit and ensure that each theme has adequate supporting data and whether they are coherent in supporting that theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During data analysis the following themes and sub-themes emerged; motivation to taking up higher education, challenges faced during studies (including financial challenges, use of technology and poor management practices) classroom and academic experiences (including curriculum and course content, pedagogical experiences) academic other support services, and isolation and adjustment.

3.9. Trustworthiness

I hoped to gain more insight and get an expanded understanding by combining both in-depth interviews and focus group methods of data collection (Cresswell, 2009). Triangulation was

one of the ways I ensured credibility and authenticity of this study. Drawing on data from different collection methods also ensures some degree of triangulation which, according to Creswell (2016) contributes to research validity, trustworthiness and reliability.

When demonstrating the credibility of qualitative research findings, trustworthiness and authenticity of data collection and analysis are important to consider. Authenticity, according to Neuman (2014, p. 218) *is "*offering a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life" from people who experience a phenomenon daily. Okeke and van Wyk (2015) indicate that trustworthiness consists of four aspects namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. One of the ways I ensured credibility was by familiarising myself with the participants by doing initial screenings to ensure they were the matured-age students and through the network sampling.

There were also a few more mechanisms I employed to ensure trustworthiness. Recorded responses from the interviews and focus groups from the research participants were transcribed without making changes to the meaning. After the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to listen to the transcribed data and were given a chance to correct, or provide more clarity to the text. I also made sure to carry out audits by way of member checking when transcribing data to ensure the authenticity and conformability of data and results.

3.10. Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality

It is important for researchers to adhere to ethical standards by making every effort to protect their respondents when conducting research (Mwaura, 2008). Howe and Moses (2013) provide two ethical frameworks with regard to protecting individual participants' anonymity that I used as guidelines during the research. The first ethical framework is deontology, which ensures that participants were treated as ends in themselves and not as the means to that end. The second framework is utilitarian, which employs a balance of benefits over harm (Howe & Moses, 2013, p. 24).

The morality criterion, according to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) refers to the fundamental moral values that are upheld during the study. I ensured that all research participants were treated in the same way. I avoided favouritism and/or discrimination towards any participants, as all mature-age students had an equal chance to be interviewed. There were also issues of informed consent, privacy, accuracy and accessibility to be considered. I ensured the anonymity of students who did not want their information or identities to be disclosed by making sure that

the data and information they provided were not directly linked to them and this was be done by using pseudonyms and codes to refer to individual students when reporting the study results. Furthermore, I also kept the information of the respondents saved on a password protected drive. I explained to the participants the purpose and process of the study and asked them to indicate their understanding and consent by signing informed consent letters. Consent letters were given in advance to the potential participants, so that they could make informed decisions before agreeing to being interviewed. Cresswell (2014) indicates that a consent letter is used to ensure that the rights and anonymity of participants are protected during the data gathering process.

Furthermore, the research ensured honesty in the methods and procedures of collecting and reporting. Participation in this study was on a voluntary basis and the study ensured their confidentiality by keeping their responses inaccessible to anyone except me and my supervisor. The only persons who listened and had access to the recordings were me and my university supervisor. I used pseudonyms and codes to ensure participant confidentiality. Members of focus groups know each other, but do not have access to any of the one-on-one interview data. All members of the focus groups were required to sign a declaration obligating them not to divulge any information from the group.

3.11. Delimitations and Limitations of the Research

3.11.1. Delimitation

Due to limited resources including time, the study was only carried out on mature-age students at the University of Namibia's Main Campus. The University has 12 campuses in four (4) different regions of the country. Thus, the finding of this study only generated insights into the student learning experiences for the mature-age students at the main campus and not the other 11 campuses around the country.

3.11.2. Limitations

Challenges posed by COVID-19 and the restrictions in place obligated me to carry out interviews and focus groups virtually. I anticipated challenges with regards to technology use by research participants. I was only able to find a very limited number of volunteers to participate due to indefinite cancellation of in-person classes.

3.12. Summary

This chapter focused on the design and research methods used in this study. The chapter describes the research paradigm and approach, and examines the research population, sample size and sampling techniques. The two data collection methods used in this qualitative study were individual interviews and focus groups. The methods were chosen in order to provide me with an in-depth understanding of mature-age students' learning experiences. Although faced with challenges posed by technology, such as broadband and constant connectivity issues, both these data collection methods provided students with an opportunity to express themselves on how they perceived their learning experiences and allowed me to understand their attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies as well as the challenges they faced during their studies. The next chapter presents the results and discussions of the study.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis of Findings

4.1. Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to investigate and explore how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM). This overall purpose includes understanding their attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies as well as the challenges they face during their studies.

This chapter will provide a presentation of the results and discussion of the results obtained through interviews and focus group discussions with mature-age students at UNAM. The analysis of data was done through a thematic content analysis, a method for describing data, but it also involves interpretation in the processes of selecting codes and constructing themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Through thematic content analysis, I constructed themes to reframe, reinterpret, and/or connect elements of the data. The data is presented under themes as they emerged from the categories of questions. The categories are: Motivation, Challenges faced during studies, Classroom and academic experiences, Support services, and Isolation and adjustment.

4.2. Description of Participants

This section provides a description of the research participants and highlights some of the characteristics which define them as mature-age adult students. Among other demographic information, it includes their age, occupation, year of study and form of admission. The participants in the study were 20 mature-age students from the University of Namibia's main campus in Windhoek. This number included both full-time and part-time students, and distance and face-to-face undergraduate students.

Since I considered the population of mature-age students at UNAM to be homogeneous with regards to their characteristics as outlined by Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) and Dill and Henley (1998) such as experiencing delayed entry to university by at least one year following high school, having dependents, being a single parent, being a full-time employee, being financially independent, attending university on a part-time basis and not having a high school diploma, I believes the sample size was sufficient in providing required data for a qualitative study. According to Maree and Petersen (2016) this sample size is sufficient because of the degree of homogeneity of mature-age students with respect to their characteristics.

Table 4.1: Demographic Information of Participants

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Course/programme of Study	Year of study	Form of Admission
1.	Turipi	59	Male	Relationship consultant/self-employed	Bachelors of Arts in Clinical Psychology	3rd	Standard
2.	Kapango	35	Male	Police Officer	Bachelor of Education in Lifelong Learning	4th	Standard
3.	Namutenya	38	Female	Business Registration Officer	Bachelor of Business Administration	4th	Mature-age entry
4.	Rudo	52	Female	Lecturer	Bachelors of Law	2nd	Standard
5.	Alma	38	Female	Community Development Officer	Bachelor of Education in Lifelong Learning	4th	Mature-age Entry
6.	Tizaa	29	Female	Administrative officer	Bachelor of Formal Education (Econ & Business)	4th	Standard
7.	Munee	28	Male	Teacher	Bachelors of Education (Primary)	4th	Recognition of Prior-Learning (RPL)
8.	Tjeripo	44	Female	Teacher	Bachelors of Education	4th	Recognition of Prior-Learning (RLP)
9.	Kamati	33	Male	Self-employed Mechanic	Bachelor of Science	3rd	Mature-age entry
10.	Nangula	25	Female	Accounting Consultant	Bachelor of Education (Math and Accounting)	2nd	Standard
11.	Ndinelao	37	Female	Soldier	Nursing	3rd	Mature-age entry
12.	Rapama	35	Male	Teacher	Bachelor of Education (formal education)	4th	Standard
13.	Ndapandula	45	Female	Personal Assistant	Business Administration	3rd	Mature-age entry
14.	Kamusuvise	40	Male	Unemployed	Bachelor of Political Science	3rd	Mature-age entry

15.	Monde	41	Female	Human Rights Officer	Bachelor of Education (Lifelong Learning)	4th	Standard
16.	Kandetu	36	Male	Artisan	Civil engineering	2nd	Recognition of Prior-Learning (RLP)
17.	Naufiku	44	Female	Administrative Officer	Bachelors of Accounting and Finance	4nd	Standard
18.	Shange	31	Female	Self-employed (small business)	Business management	4th	Standard
19.	Jan	50	Male	Artisan	Business administration	2nd	Recognition of Prior-Learning (RLP)
20.	Elmien	29	Female	Diamond Polisher	Bachelor of Lifelong learning and Community Education	2th	Mature-age entry

Understanding and contextualising who mature-age students are is very critical and central to this study. Thus, the data provided in Table 4.1 (demographic information of participants) puts into context the type of students to be referred to as mature-age students. Mature-aged adult students form part of the broader category of non-traditional students and, according to Hardin (2008) these characteristics often put them at risk of being unsuccessful and includes: delaying enrolment into higher education until adulthood; enrolling part time; working full time; being financially independent; being financially responsible for others; having family responsibilities; and having academic deficiencies.

I addition, including the form of admission gives one an understanding of how mature-age students get admission to the university. The University of Namibia (UNAM) has three main forms of admission, which are: the standard form through which most traditional students get admissions; mature-age entry which is an admission scheme used by many adults and out of school youth who are not in possession of a grade 12 qualification but have work experience and are above the age of 21; and recognition of prior learning admission scheme also known as RPL which assesses individual learning that is acquired on the job. Among the twenty (20) participants of this study, seven (7) gained admission through the mature-age entry scheme and nine (9) students gained their admission through the standard form of admission and four (4)

indicated that they got their admission through the recognition of prior learning also known as (RPL). All participants were studying towards a bachelor's degree in different fields of study. This shows that the standard form of entry is the most predominant form among mature-age students.

Furthermore, age is one crucial factor when determining and conceptualising who a mature-age student is. The age range of the participants was between 25 and 59. Some scholars define non-traditional by age for example, those over 25 years old (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Edwards & Person, 1997; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2003; Sissle, Hansmann, & Kasworm, 2001; Senter & Senter, 1998). Ho and Lim (2020) point out that, while it is common to define an adult by legal age, it is not simple to use the same principle to define who a mature-age adult learner is. Thus, I believed that a combination of age, occupation and form of admission provided this study with a better understanding of who mature-age students are and formed part of this study.

Finally, I also included the year of study. This was important because the longer they studied, the more learning and university experience they have and the more they are likely to provide rich information regarding their experiences. Patton (2002) suggests that understanding the perceptions, feelings, and knowledge of people, typically through in-depth, intensive interviewing, and/or observation would require that they should have experienced the phenomena thoroughly to be able to provide a detailed account of the experiences.

The data is presented under the following themes as they emerged from the interviews and focus groups:

- Motivation for taking up higher education
- Challenges faced during studies, including
    - Financial challenges
    - Situational and Psychological barriers
    - Technological challenges
    - Time Constraints
    - Poor Management and Administrative practices
- Classroom and Academic experiences which include
    - Curriculum and course content,
    - Pedagogical Experiences,

- Student support services.
- Peer support
- Isolation and adjustment

As part of data reduction (Ouma, 2019) I coded the participants and gave them pseudonyms. I came up with names commonly used in their culture and ethnic groups. For example, the commonly used names for a male in the Oshiwambo culture and language is Kamati, Haufiku, Hamutenya etc. to ensure anonymity in reporting and for easy referencing in terms of who said what, while retaining some cultural nuances.

4.3. Motivation for taking up Higher Education

Motivation explains why people take up a particular activity, how long they are willing to persist in it and what effort they invest in it (Kormos & Csizér, 2014). Adults participate in learning and education for myriad reasons which, according to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) are complex and subject to change. Motivation to learn for adults, according to Merriam *et al.* (2007) consists of three orientations to learning. These are goal-oriented learners, who enrol in education to achieve a set goal; activity-orientated learners, who participate for the sake of the activity itself and for social engagement; and learning-oriented learners who enrol in education to seek knowledge for its own sake (2007, p. 64).

The question of motivation is relevant to this study in order to understand the participants' orientation to learning as this has implications for how they engage the university community including lecturers, other students and the learning materials. According to Wlodkowski (1985) motivation is important because it is a causal factor of learning, it also mediates learning and it is a consequence of learning too. The motivation has implications for the attitudes mature-age students might have towards learning. Learners who complete a learning experience and feel motivated about it are more likely to have future interest and are also more likely to use what they have learned (Wlodkowski, 1985, p. 4). Attitudes towards learning can be a combination of concepts, information and emotion a learner might have towards learning or the learning enterprise that may result in an inclination to respond positively or negatively towards the learning environment (Wlodkowski, 1985).

From the outset of the data analysis, it was clear that the motivations of participants for taking undergraduate studies were different; however, the majority indicated that obtaining an

undergraduate degree was for continuous professional development, otherwise known as CPD and advancement which is to improve one's job status or progress to a better one and/or get certified. During individual interviews a few participants are quoted here pointing their motivation towards continuous professional development including certification, promotion and better career prospects:

> *Yeah, you know, nowadays without education you will be at the same level. What actually motivated me is when we started working, because we started working at the Minister of Trade as a data typist, and then I saw, like, some of my colleagues were studying, and then when you study and you get the qualification, your salary goes up, they pay you a certain amount and things like that. And you have more opportunities to apply for higher positions in the organisation. So, I told myself, let me just do this as well, because I did not pass well, in grade 12. I only had 22 points, and they wanted most people to [obtain] C in English and not and then I decided, let me just take this opportunity to study through mature-age. And I believe when I'm done with this one will be okay* (**Namutenya).**

> *So, just to get a degree, did it that piece of papers that can open doors towards me being a fully licensed, as a consultant. Yeah. There were a lot of opportunities that I couldn't partake in simply because I'm not licensed". And this degree will help to get a licence* **(Turipi).**

> *I have been volunteering for a while as a relief teacher and so I developed a love for teaching. I thought this is fun I can actually do this. For me to become a qualified teacher I needed to obtain a qualification* **(Tizaa)**.

> *Being in the teaching profession already and not having a qualification at first, it was that critical to obtain one because we are referred to as unqualified teachers* **(Munee)**.

CPD is the development of professionalism, through activities such as self-directed learning, conference attendance, teaching or taking a class, participating in workshops, engaging in peer consultation and publishing or presenting professional papers (Niemeyer, Taylor & Cox 2012, p.476). However, CPD and the activities provided here are not the only means to professionalism, because, I believe, higher education and training and subsequent programmes such as induction, mentoring and coaching are also part of professionalization process. These

kinds of CPD provide what Hansmann (2016, p.32) refers to as context-rich opportunities for learning. Apart from higher education and training there are also other activities which leads to professionalisation.

A good number of participants indicated that obtaining a degree is supported by the institutions they work for. This is an indication that there is an increased private sector and government investment in professional development and continuing education for employees. **Alma** employed as a community development officer is quoted here say:

> *Since I'm working in the field of community development, I wanted more insight on the field of community development and lifelong learning out to work with adults. And so, it's beneficial for me also, I'm also trying to gain theoretical experience also.*

Some participants showed cognitive interest when asked what motivated them to obtain an undergraduate degree; this also means seeking knowledge for its own sake. **Rudo**, employed as a lecturer, exemplifies this inclination:

> *I always wanted to do law, but then when I was growing up, when I was choosing my career path, uh, that those days our parents used to play a crucial role. So, my dad believed that because I used to have migraine headaches, I couldn't manage law. So, I was better off doing something lighter, which didn't need me to read a lot of books. So, he preferred I do accounting, but then I always wanted to do law. Now I say, this is the chance I'm going to do it***.**

Like Merriam *et al.* (2007) points out, some mature-age students are motivated to remedy past educational deficiencies and a few participants in this study attributed their motivation to this factor. **Kapango** is quoted here expressing this kind of motivation:

> *So, I knew I wanted to, I never wanted to, to get old with my diploma I wanted just to add on. And the only institution which gives me quality education is UNAM.*

Others are motivated to improve their economic situation and earn a better salary. Without a doubt the need to lock onto a good job and earn a decent salary is what O'Shea and Stone (2011) describe as an over-riding requirement in the current economic and social climate (p.

280). From the focus group discussion **Rapama** indicated that what motivates them to study is to be independent financially.

> *What is motivating me to study is I want to be independent. So, like my brother mentioned, I want to acquire my own resources in a in a straightforward way. And also get a job on at the same time. Empower those around me financially.*

Overall mature-age students in this study are mostly goal-oriented learners, who enrol in education to achieve a set goal and only a few are learning-oriented learners who enrol in education to seek knowledge for its own sake and or to improve their skills.

All participants indicated that their motivation had been consistent through their studies and had not changed much. Furthermore, when asked if their motivation influenced how they engaged lecturers, other students and support services, almost all participants agreed that their motivation had an influence. A good number of participants were quick to point out that their motivation influenced how in most cases they ask question in class which are more practical:

> *So, it's, it's more like when the lecturer is giving classes, you ask questions just for a broader understanding. We ask more practical questions than theory based. Because younger students are more in theory. It's because we are working already* **(Elmien).**

> **….** *normally during classes my questions are more direct and practical, because I usual want to see lecturers providing practical experiences and examples so I will be able to use them when I practice law one day* **(Rudo)**.

From the responses above one would argue that mature-age student's engagement with the learning encounter is more purposeful and practical than theoretical. This finding is not surprising as it relates to what Milheim (2005) found that mature-age adult learners desire course work that has practical applications. In addition, Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe (2018) found that practical application of the theories learnt is particularly important in the teaching and learning processes of mature-age students at universities. It is also consistent with Knowles's fourth assumption that mature-age learners are problem-centred and interested in immediate application of knowledge and skills gained from a programme (1980).

Furthermore, the data also shows that mature-age students' motivations have a bearing on the self-directedness and autonomy of mature-age learners. According to Brocket and Hiemstra (1991) self-direction in learning refers to both the external characteristics of an instructional process and the internal characteristics of the learner, where the individual assumes primary responsibility for a learning experience (p. 24). From the individual interviews **Tjeripo,** an unqualified teacher who is currently enrolled for bachelors of education as part of the Ministry of Education's initiative and efforts to provide opportunities to unqualified teachers to earn qualifications, is quoted here describing how self-directed and autonomous she has become through the opportunity to study -

> *The opportunity to study enables me to conduct research on my own on some topics I teach and wanted insights on and the lectures usually help me even if it's not part of the course content.*

This finding agrees with what Wlodkowski (1985) points out that "*when adults see themselves as the locus of causality for their learning, they are much more likely to be intrinsically and positively motivated"* (p. 217).

4.4. Challenges faced during studies

4.4.1. Financial Challenges

Almost all respondents indicated that they faced financial challenges since they had to pay for their own studies. These financial difficulties go beyond tuition and fees to include transport to and from university and unpaid leave to attend classes especially for those who do not have study leave privileges from their employers. They all pointed out that they do not qualify for funding from The Namibia Students Financial Assistance Fund (NSFAF). It can therefore be said that mature-age students face financial challenges which can also be considered as barrier to learning. According to Merriam *et al.* (2007) two of the most cited reasons in the literature of adult non-participation are a lack of money to pay for the programme and time constraints. These are in most cases socially acceptable reasons especially for adults who have multiple responsibilities and roles in family and communities (Merriam *et al.*, 2007).

Financial challenges are one of the biggest factors influencing mature-age learner's experiences as described by the following students:

> *I am paying for myself right now. The payments have to be done and you know, I have a lot of other responsibilities and if one does not pay, then you don't get your results* **(Namutenya)**.

> *I am self-funded, I already have a degree and NASFAF does not, sponsor people who are going for a second-degree undergraduate level, they may take you on, if you are applying for post graduate masters, PhD. But since this is an undergraduate level, I didn't qualify. So, I'm self-funded. The things I've tried to do to generate funds for me, income was now curtailed was now inhibited. You know, I had to cut down on a lot of things, so it made a bit tough. Fortunately, I have a very supportive wife, so we were able to tighten the belt and get it done* **(Turipi).**

> *Um, I am self- financing. Uh, I've tried to apply for, um, staff development, but on our last day, when we closed the store, it was just approved. So, I don't know I'm planning on appealing, but I don't know why it was disapproved. It constrains me financially because I've got two children* **(Rudo).**

When asked if they qualified for other sources of funding, for most of the employed participants of this study, many indicated that their employers have some kind of funding opportunity. Two employed participants confirmed this during individual interviews:

> *Yeah, at work there is a programme for people that are studying, if you want the organisation to fund you, then they will do deductions from your salary. But I just didn't, want the loan because it would mean staying at the job for longer and I don't see myself in this job for much longer. So that's I decided just to take the risk and just pay for myself* **(Rapama). -**.

Students who were fortunate enough and who were able to pay for their studies through their employers, still had issues relating to cost of travelling to attend summer or vacation classes by distance and part-time students. **Alma** and **Kapango,** distance students who were situated more than 500km from the main campus, still faced the challenge of paying for transport to get them to the main campus including board and lodging.

> *I'm employed, when I got my diploma, I funded it myself. But last year, I was fortunate that my employer funded it for me since it's in line with the work I am*

> *doing. But I have to travel to Windhoek for classes and this costs money, too* **(Alma).**
>
> *I am in Rundu and its 500+ kilometres, so travelling cost money and accommodation also costs a lot of money in Windhoek* **(Kapango**).

The data thus indicates that there is some kind of funding available for mature-age students; however, this funding is mostly through the organisations they work for. This implies that if mature-age adult students are unemployed, it would be extremely difficult to access any type of funding. Thus, this would make it difficult for unemployed mature-age adults to obtain university qualifications.

4.4.2. Situational and Psychological Barriers

These are factors that hinder participation which one has no control over. According to Hardin, situational barriers common to adult students are costs of the programme, role conflicts, time management issues, family and work problems (2008, p. 520). In addition to situational barriers, participants demonstrated challenges which are psychological or internal barriers, what Merriam *et al.* describe as reflecting personal attitudes (2007, p. 66). Hardin (2008) and Fragoso *et al.* (2013) also believe that psychological barriers include "inadequate coping skills, lack of self-confidence and poor self-image, anxiety about schooling based on prior experience, and negative beliefs or expectations about outcomes" (p. 9). Stress and anxiety as a result of lack of financial resources are some of the factors influencing a few participants' learning experiences:

> *I'm paying myself. My first year I applied to NASFAF and they rejected my application, so I have to pay myself. Second year, I applied again, they rejected. In my third year I just surrendered, and just decided to pay for myself. So, my salary is the one helping me. So, then it really stressed me up. So, if I don't schedule my account, then it's like, every time I'm thinking, am I going to write the exam? So, I don't feel free? That really stressed me out* **(Kapango)**.
>
> *I had to get back in the restructures of operating like a student was pretty tough. And then during the first year, I also did not to divorce myself from a lot of things that I was doing privately. So, there were a number of clashes or conflicts. And throughout that year, to the degree that I ended up being forced to repeat two,*

> *two modules. So, uh, the next semester I took, I took two extras, um, modules to make up for the previous year. I had to, because that was tough on me and living life and contributing to a family. Um, so it was tough in that manner* **(Jan**).

4.4.3. Technology Challenges

Another major challenge faced by the mature-age adult students is technology use. A few participants attributed this challenge to the university's intranet system not functioning uniformly well. When asked how they find the technology use at the university, participants were quick to point out that it fails most of the time and that they do not have access when they need it:

> *It's not too bad but sometimes it's a bit slow when you want to download something, we want to do to search something and yeah, it's okay. But it's a bit challenging. Sometimes it can be frustrating, especially when you have due date for assignment or something that you want to submit them* **(Kamati)**.

> *Um, the technology is supposed to be, up to standard, but the only setback is that half the time the server is down. So, which means, it's as good as it's not there, you cannot access anything because the server is down, it's being, uh, upgraded. It's what if it is a problem? What have you? So that actually makes it non-existent in a way, because it is always a problem. And when people started exams, the exams were cancelled. The first day online because technology failed the university. So that is why I'm saying the technology is supposed to be up to standards, but it doesn't function* **(Rudo)**.

Some have attributed a lack of their own information and communication technology ICT skills as a major challenge. One student had this to say:

> *So, the technologies are pretty challenging because now you are expected to zoom, you too are expected to join a WhatsApp group is like, how do you join? Is it through SMS? what do you do? Um, or they send you a link, what is a link? Uh, so yeah, those type of challenges were there. But, uh, fortunately there are around me, a number of young people who are open to showing me how to get things done* **(Turipi)**.

4.4.4. Time Constraints

One major important factor influencing mature-age student learning experience is time constraints. For women, especially, the volume of their time commitments resulted in intolerable workloads and the unbounded nature of family work involved significant time cost. Time constraints were experienced more by women participants in this study. **Tjeripo**, an unqualified primary school teacher, who is studying to obtain bachelor of education, expressed how her workloads as a mother of three school-going children was a mayor challenge for her:

> *I have three school going children, in addition to the need to make time to mark and prepare lesson for the next day, I also need to help my children with their homework, make sure they are fed and all that. In most cases, I have to go to bed very late and it's exhausting. My husband also works late hours; I have to do all these by myself often.*

Williams and Seary (2011) found that for many mature-age students, becoming a student can conflict with their multiple roles as employees, parents, leaders in their communities etc. Stone (2008) also found that lack of time, time management skills, balancing the need to study, home and family and changes in family relationships were challenges facing the female mature-age students. This is exemplified by **Nangula** who had a highly demanding job:

> *I am really struggling to manage my time having a full-time job and completing assignment. My job also requires me to travel out of town and when I do, I cannot travel with my books and the tasks I have to do. So, in most cases my assignments are late and you get penalised for that you know.*

This Finding was not surprising as mature-age adult students are more likely to have roles and responsibilities which have to do with family, community and work especially for the female students (Roberts, 2011). As someone taking care of other and also having to attend to family matters, **Ndinelao** also complained about lack of time:

> *The whole thing of time management is big, committing some hours to your study time, it's hard because family issue does have schedules, they pop-up anytime. Staying up all night to study. It's not easy at all especially when you have other to take care of.*

4.4.5. Poor Administration and Management

Participants indicated poor university administration in many aspects. This ranged from the time it takes for the university to process certain things like exemptions to examinations and assignment management and teaching administration. One example is **Nangula** who is now doing a bachelor of education degree and applied for exemption from a course she already completed in her first degree, but it took UNAM staff the whole semester to complete the exemption process, she states:

> *I applied to be exempted from a few courses which I already did in my first degree. It took them the whole semester to complete this process. I actually got my exemption approval the day I wrote exams for those courses.*

From the focus group discussion participants indicated major challenges regarding poor administration and management. These included examination and assignment scripts getting lost as well as student not knowing and not being informed about whether they qualified for examinations or not as a result of continuous assessment marks not uploaded on student portals on time and/or not communicated to them. A few participants supported this claim during a focus group discussion:

> *They are always late with everything. Students always have to prepare themselves for this thing of not knowing whether they have qualified for examination or not. So, some students will go to examination rooms without knowing whether they qualified or not. So sometimes students will be notified after writing an examination paper or after the examination have passed. Then they will be told that no you you're not supposed to write this paper or you didn't qualify for exams. Yeah, and the challenge is really, really big and even examination papers used to get lost. Some students could not graduate, even with one module, or three, because the examination paper or assignment, papers got lost.*

The issue of examination and assignment scrip getting lost was felt greatly among all participants. This seems to be a major cause for concern. One would assume that students' assignment and examination scripts are not properly recorded and stored during and after examinations. This also shows that students' attendance at examination halls is not recorded and that there is a lack of accountability from the examination

officials. From the individual interviews **Rudo** spoke at length about how there are flaws with regard to UNAM's administration:

> *last year there were some of us who wrote exams, but we were told that we were absent from the exams, and up to now were have been trying to contact this one lecturer and we were being tossed back and forth. Administration could not find the list of students who wrote that examinations and so they kept sending us back and forth between the lecturer and them. It was really frustrating.*

Poor administration and management practices can be considered institutional barriers which would affect all students, not just those of mature age. Poor administration was also indicated by participants in terms of teaching administration. Several participants pointed out that sometimes they do not receive a course outline within the first week of the semester. According to them, lecturer and course administrators are supposed to upload the course outline on the portal at least the first week of the semester, but this does not always happen. One participant **Naufiku,** a final year bachelor of business administration student, spoke at length about how this is very frustrating:

> *As an administrator myself I find it very disappointing to have things like course outline given to students very late. I mean how do I find the resources such as books and articles I need to read, because the course outline is supposed to provide all that? This is even very frustrating knowing that UNAM has now more faculty and department administrators. They need to upload these things the first day actually.*

However, although students receive the course outline late, many participants applauded the course outlines indicating that in most cases the course outline is clear, comprehensive and useful. In addition, a good number also point out that the instructions on the course outline were clear with regard to the prescribed textbooks and other additional materials needed for the courses. When asked if they were given an opportunity to discuss the course outline, almost all participants said that they were never given that opportunity.

4.5. Classroom and Academic Experiences

4.5.1. Curriculum and Course Content

Students were asked to give their views on the curriculum and course content in terms how relevant, up-to-date and useful it was to them. The general responses which emerged from both the interviews and focus groups regarding the course content was that it was both up-to-date, relevant and understandable to them. The following where some of the responses obtained from students:

> *Everything is explained well in the course, because it's guidance to what you need to learn in that setting module or subject. All you do the research on your own interests. When you come to class, you already know, oh, it's going this way. And it's very, it's very helpful. It helps a lot. Because it guides you on what you need to know and yeah* **(Namutenya).**

> *The course is very relevant. Because, to me, personally, it's relevant because the work that I'm doing, and the things that I'm studying, there's always something new that I'm learning. Things I haven't thought about that learning from this course. It's just the research that is a bit difficult to do online or on test. And yeah. We need more. I think we need more classes on that one* **(Alma).**

> *Yeah, the course content is understandable, and it's relevant to me. Because, before I started with my studies, I was doing the literacy programme, and then when I was teaching the elders, I have to get some knowledge on how to handle these people. The knowledge I am gaining from the course content is adding more knowledge and skills on how to handle community members. In general, the course itself, it's relevant, it's important to me in my career* **(Kapango)**.

However, despite indicating that the course content is favourable, the data also indicated that something needed to be done about the course content and curriculum in general. From the responses, participants indicated that some information provided is outdated and had no relevance to the contemporary social-economic context. In addition, some expressed that the curriculum and course content was not reflective of the African context. This is depicted in a few responses from the focus group discussions:

> *Unfortunately, there's too much of a Eurocentric feel to the course content. Um, we concentrate too much on, philosophers that are all European based. The agenda is about Europe and America and what these people said. And so, I'm like, so where are the Africans now relevant? Are these people who are somewhere 400 years ago, somewhere in Europe, you know, who's going to use their theories or whatever. What about our own people? (***Turipi)**

> *What actually is a setback is that you are given study materials online and then when they try to finally engage you, they tell you this is outdated. Then you sit back and it's like given outdated information in the first place. (***Naufiku)**

Another prominent issue which emerged from the data is that of study guides. In most focus group discussion participants were quick to point out how useful the specific study guides are in their future careers as teachers, lawyers, and administrators. Most viewed the guides as very interesting, helpful, clear and understandable.

> *The study guides are interesting, well-structured and gave me a better understanding of the historical foundation of education. I wish we have study guides for all the course, because even if the lecturer does not turn up for class the guides will help you* **(Tjeripo).**

Others expressed that on the whole the courses are interesting and challenging and that they feel that the course is making them competent.

> *The modules are a bit challenging, but that is good because it's challenging me in a good way so I get to think critically* **(Kamati)**.

However, a good number of participants in the study complained about the issue of repetition of modules and some modules need to be revised. The other shortfall is that some lack practical examples.

> *The modules are a bit complicated and confusing* **(Ndinelago)**.

The most frequent comments from **Rudo,** a law student, is that the study guides have too much content. She states "*the modules are interesting but lacks Namibian application." "Also, lecturers should compile a study guide so that we can follow nicely*". This means that there is not enough time to cover module per semester. She also complained of a lack application to

the Namibian context. She suggested that study guides should be developed so that students can follow better and faster.

Furthermore, it can also be observed that there are no specific study guides for most courses and this (as expressed by participants) leads to overload of notes and this causes confusion. This is evident in that the majority of participants have exposed that there are no set objectives for the modules or courses.

> *If only professor could set up specific objectives for each module e.g., teaching techniques, teaching aids etc.; everything will run smoothly* **(Rapama)**

> *The lecturer should provide students with a study guide that has clear objectives* **(Ndapandula).**

It is therefore inferred that there are insufficient study guides in the various faculties and departments; students are given the options of using text books which are not available or are not in supply in book shops and libraries.

Many participants stressed that some courses do not have enough study resources and that some modules are a repetition of modules and courses already covered in preceding semesters or years. Modules also have lot of content and insufficient time allocated. In most interviews and focus groups, the majority of the students suggested the inclusion of more challenging activities in classes and in assignments and not only in tests and examinations.

> *The modules do not have enough resources so that we can read more; it also need to prescribe books so that we can follow well* **(Kamusuvise)**.

> *The lecturer gives few and simple example in class but his questions are strictly and hard and above our level of understanding in test and exam. The module is ok* **(Kandetu).**

4.5.2. Pedagogical Experiences

When it comes to understanding mature-age students' views and attitudes about the teaching styles and strategies, most of participants indicated that the teaching styles and strategies used are not what they expect. They view the teaching and learning experience as mostly theory based and they feel that they are mostly required to memorise these theories and facts as

opposed to being taught on how to apply them in their settings and circumstances. As such the teaching styles and strategies were highlighted by the participants as being discrepant with the expectations of many participants in the study. It can therefore be argued that there is a lack of the use of adult learning and teaching approaches such as experiential and transformational learning. Keeton and Tate (1978) define experiential learning as "learning that takes place when the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied". While transformative learning occurs when mature-age learners construct new meaning structures in order to make sense of their changing world. One student said this about being taught to memorise:

> *When it comes to psychology itself, it's mostly multiple questions and you need to have memorized that or have read with a photographic memory on who said what where and so on. That can be monotonous and boring. You know, you can walk up to a student two weeks later and ask them a question and they will not remember a damn thing because it didn't stick* **(Kamusuvise)**.

In another critical observation with regard to teaching approaches used by lecturers, participants qualified the importance of learner participation and being inclusive of all students learning needs. **Rudo** a lecturer at the university and who is now a bachelor's law student pointed out that:

> *I haven't done a qualification in education. But some teachers really lack the proper teaching styles, the approach, you are told as a student when you do your education course that you need to engage students, such as learner participation thing. Of course, student participating being at this level, and then, use, various ways of reaching at your students in mind maps and what have you, to make sure that the students are following? I actually noticed that some lecturers don't have that, uh, in their approach, as long as they have told you what they needed to tell you that's it.*
>
> *They are also actually quick switch off the online class before people can satisfactorily ask questions. They are just in a hurry. They don't have much time to exhaust all the questions to make sure that students have understood and so forth.*

Others also had similar complaints regarding teaching style and strategies, stressing the need to make teaching and learning interesting and being flexible enough to accommodate learning needs of all students:

> *It is a necessity for the lecturers to be flexible and make the learning process interesting for all. They don't seem to cater for all students* **(Munee)**.

> *I feel like certain important concepts go unexplained or even untouched, if a subject or topics is covered it's very brief and they don't really go into details, so you can be able to apply it in practice* **(Nangula)**

A good number of participants also indicated that there is too much reading from the study guides and notes by the lecturers. Teaching of adults in higher education is more effective when it is interactive (Sogunro, 2015). Mature-age learners generally demonstrate a wide diversity in their learning approaches and preferences (Williams & Seary, 2011). It could be that, given the mixture of traditional and mature-age students, it becomes difficult for the lecturer to make the teaching and learning experience meaningful for the diverse group. Gravels (2011) points out that the role of the lecturer is to teach in a way that actively involves and engages the learners. This call for lecturer to use teaching and learning approaches which are learner centred. Learners-centred approaches emphasise the role of the learner in the teaching and learning process and puts them in active role in the learning transaction (Cordera, 2008).

In their responses, participants were prompt in attributing poor teaching and learning approaches and strategies used by lecturers to the implementation of online classes. The university had to implement online teaching as a result of lockdown measures by government to curb the spread of COVID-19.

> *There is just too much reading from the books and modules, it shows that they are not well prepared" but when we have in-person classes, you learn more and you get more from the lecturers* **(Tizaa)**

From the responses above, it can be argued that lecturers need to do more in terms of teaching and learning to accommodate all types of learners. **Turipi,** a self-taught relationship consultant, marriage counsellor and life coach who is currently in his 3rd year of bachelor of psychology, had this to say about teaching and learning not accommodating all learning needs and not being experiential enough:

> *It's all theory and no practical application. So where are the field trips to medical clinics to see what happens there and related it to the theory in class?*

Programme or course content relevance connects learning to reality (Sogunro, 2015). In many instances adult learners see learning as a means to an end and thus would value learning experiences only if they are relevant to their needs. When ask what kind of feedback they receive and how important it is to them, a few participants indicated that some lecturers try their best in providing feedback on time; however, a few indicated that in most cases the feedback is late:

> *Feedback especially on assessment like text and assignments is very late for some lecturers, so if you get it late, it's actually not helpful* **(Munee)**.

However, a few participants experienced delays in feedback to the extent that student are sometime provided with feedback less than a day before they sit for examinations, **Rudo** is quoted saying –

> *When it comes to feedback on assignments, I find the feedback to be much delayed. By the time it comes you are so tired of waiting anxiously. This one time we got feedback like a day before we wrote the exams.*

4.6. Student Support Services

According to Tait (1996, p. 232) student support is made up of tutoring whether face-to-face or via correspondence, academic counselling, organisation of study centres and interactive teaching through media. When asked about what their views are regarding registration, orientation and support services, what they use and how effective they find them, a good number indicated that support services including registration and orientation process is always smooth.

Shange – states:

> *Support services for law students seems to be ok because you are given written material, you are given where to find information and who to approach.*

> *I love their orientation programme, it very holistic and fun!* **(Turipi).**

Among the 20 participants 16 indicated that some lecturers are kind and always ready to assist them. Amazingly, most participants revealed that most lecturers are friendly, courteous and, display professionalism. Therefore, they regard them as good lecturers. This is evident in the following quote by **Namutenya,** single mother of two working as a business registration officer:

> *Some lectures don't have a problem of sharing their contact their personal numbers to students for us to inquiring, or if you have any questions, you call them in the offices" There are those who are really doing their work if you send an email or WhatsApp SMS asking, they will get back to you or they can refer you to where you can get the answers, but "It depends from lecturer to lecturer.*

This finding is as a factor of success is attuned with Sogunro (2015) who points out that academic staff who provide progressive assessment and timely feedback are supportive as these are important factors for students' success. Although some participants indicated that lecturers do provide feedback and in most of their responses, participants referred to the fact that this varies from one lecturer to the next. This is an indication that not all lecturers are helpful and willing to provide support to students.

When asked which support services students use the most, it appears that most participants only know of the library the main support services by the university.

> *Yeah, the library, that's accessible, even if it's far from you, even if it's far from you* **(Alma).**

> *I use the library mostly, ok, that's pretty all they have anyway* **(Turipi)**.

Sogunro (2015) in his study on adult student motivation in higher education also pointed out that there are eight top motivating factors which are quality of instruction and curriculum, relevance, interactive classrooms, effective management, progressive assessment and timely feedback; self-directedness, conducing learning environment and effective academic practices. With regard to motivation the data suggests that the University of Namibia is not doing well to motivate student and ensure their success. This is due to the numerous challenges and barriers mature-age students are faced with as outlined above. Sogunro (2015 p.22) also points out that among all teaching and learning transactions, motivation is considered to be an inevitable construct that evokes and sustain effective learning.

4.7. Peer Support

Furthermore, the data shows that peer support and peer mentoring seem to be the dominant form of student support used by mature-age students. In a report on student-student support and mentoring Boyle, Kwon, Ross and Simpson (2010) also found that peer mentoring and support can be important especially for non-traditional students for two reasons – increased retention and increased engagement (p. 116). Responses from many participants indicate that peer mentoring and support mostly occur between mature-age students and traditional students with the latter being the mentors. This is mostly done through the use of mobile phone and mobile application such as WhatsApp Groups. A few participants said this regarding peer support:

> *Yeah, through WhatsApp. Yeah, we have created groups, where we see each other if somebody needs assistance, for instance, in the referencing or how to refresh things or what not to and we assist each other* **(Alma)**.

> *I really enjoy the support from my kids in my class because they are not selfish, they are willing to go an extra mile and we have been sharing resources* **(Rudo).**

As Merrill (2015) noted, peer support is also highlighted as being essential in helping adult students make sense of the academic language and culture. Boyle *et al.* (2010) also argue that peer mentoring and support help build a sense of connection and belonging to a community of learners and increase academic enjoyment and motivation. In practical terms this included helping each other with written work and the understanding of reading materials as well as encouraging each other to keep on going, as expressed by **Kamusuvise:**

> *Yes. Did you know? They will cry together with you when we don't know how to make a sense out of an assignment and so on. Yes. There are students who, you know, we have exchanged telephone numbers and we call each other.*

Figure 4.1 below shows the motivating factors for mature-age students at the University of Namibia.

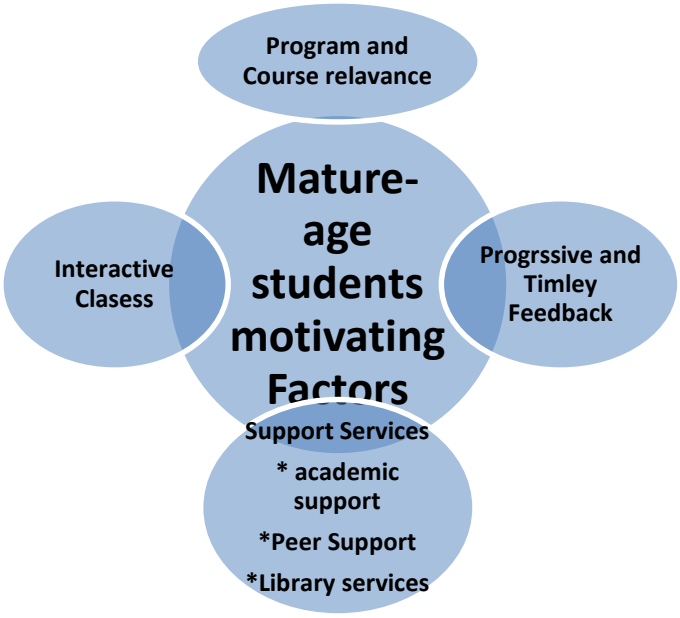

Figure 4.1: Motivating factors for mature-age students in undergraduate programmes

Source: Adapted from Sogunro (2015)

4.8. Isolation and Adjustment

Participants were asked to describe if they experienced any kind of isolation in class and the university community. Participants were also asked to talk about issues related to adjusting to university life. These questions were crucial in determining whether they had integration problems and whether they felt welcomed and part of the university community. This theme is also linked to the theme of psychological barriers discussed earlier in this chapter.

A few participants, especially the much younger mature-age students, were able to adjust and adapt to university way of life and doing things such as navigating the university portal. On the other hand, a few respondents, especially the much older students, experienced problems with adjusting to the university culture and way of doing things such as academic writing, high expectations and general academic anxiety. For example, **Turipi** struggled with many aspects of what was expected of him as a student; his ability to perform certain tasks was not at the level required, he states:

> *For someone who has studied many years back, the way things are done now is different. When I was a student back then I was not expected to zoom, to zip documents, to change documents to PDF and to google for information. We*

> *don't get that orientation to help us. I can also not keep up with taking notes and listening to presentation and participating in the topic at the same time and all that. You have to do all these while also trying to understand what is being taught.*

Namutenya also had similar issues as those of **Turipi**, she states:

> *Yeah, it's sometimes it happens where you really can't get something, especially for me the challenge that I never had accounting in high school, so I just did the accounting now, so it was a bit challenging for me to get the formulas and how to do things. And when you go to these young ones, they will ask them, how did you get this answer and things like that. The way they will explain to you is as if you look stupid to them.*

Tjeripo complained about time academic anxiety and unrealistic expectations:

> *Yes, I had problems adjusting to university life, I am always anxious and have unrealistic expectations. I struggled mostly with academic writing and referencing and as a teacher I am used to being in charge of the class and now it's the other way round. Also spending time in the library looking for books and resources, I really not used to that.*

It is clear here that mature-age students, especially the much older students, experienced a sense of isolation and struggled with adjusting to university life and community. Isolation and feeling of loneliness are a phenomenon forming part of student experience in universities (Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench & King, 2015). Meuleman *et al.* also state that loneliness and isolation especially in social context such as university and or classroom reflects a lack of integration into that university or classroom (2015).

Student integration and interaction suggests that the more the student is engaged and interacts with others the likelier they are to successfully complete their studies. However, there is currently no evidence to suggest that mature age student's social integration influences their institutional commitment (cited in Braxton & Hirschey, 2004).

According to Schreiner (2010) a sense of belonging at university involves feeling of fitting into university. Participants were also asked if they felt any kind of isolation in class or in the university community.

> *Being a matured student there is always a poor relationship with younger students, sometimes they don't want to associate with us because of the age difference* **(Ndapandula).**

While it can be argued that mature aged students have a better self-complexity, less anxiety and a general better academic performance (Dill & Henley & Kasworm, 2008) than their younger counterparts, despite the challenges they face and level of integration. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) suggests that for mature-age adult students, the key to success in their studies is not in developing their own social identity in the new learning community, but in striking a balance between their academic and external commitments that enables them to reach a level of engagement sufficient to achieve academic success. However, it is apparent here that finding friends when transitioning to university is necessary for adjustment purposes, community, and connection with the university which according to Meuleman *et al.* ultimately supports retention (2015).

4.9. Summary

This chapter provided the data presentation and analysis of findings. The main purpose of this study was to investigate and explore how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM). This overall purpose includes understanding their attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies as well as the challenges they face during their studies. The qualitative data from the individual interviews and focus group discussions was thematically analysed. Thematic analysis focused on how individuals personally attach meaning to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, cited in Creswell, 2016). During data analysis, the following themes and sub-themes emerged: motivation to taking up higher education, challenges faced during studies (these included financial challenges, use of technology and poor management practices), Classroom and academic experiences (which included, curriculum and course content), pedagogical experiences, academic and other support services, isolation and adjustment.

Chapter 5: Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Introduction

This chapter summarises the findings, presents the conclusions of this qualitative study. The data was obtained through interviews (interview guide) and focus group discussions (discussion guide) with mature-age students at University of Namibia (UNAM) and makes some recommendations for improved learning experiences of mature-age students. The main purpose of this study was to explore how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at UNAM. This overall purpose includes understanding their attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies as well as the challenges they face during their studies. The findings of the study are drawn exclusively from the interviews with the participants and focus group discussions and are grouped and discussed here under the themes as they emerged from the interview and focus group data.

5.2. Summary of the Findings

5.2.1. Motivation for taking up Higher Education

In terms of what motivates a mature-age student to study at UNAM, the study found that they are obtaining an undergraduate degree for different purposes. These purposes include continuous professional development, and career advancement: to improve one's job status or progress to a better one; according to the students, this would earn them a better salary and/or enable them to get certified. In addition, some participants showed cognitive interest which means mature-age students seeking knowledge for its own sake. Furthermore, it was also interesting to find out that mature-age students are motivated to remedy past educational deficiencies.

It was also interesting to find that mature-age students' motivations had an influence on how they engaged lecturers, other students and support services. In terms of engaging lecturers, a mature-age student often requires a learning experience which is more purposeful and practical than theoretical. This finding is not surprising as it relates to Mulheim's (2005) finding that mature-age adult learners desire course work that has practical applications. Also, the data show that mature-age students' motivations have a bearing on the self-directedness and autonomy as mature-age learners. The data show that mature-age student is motivated to learn on their own and to investigate topics, identify resources for learning, even if it were not part

of the required activities (Knowles, 1975, Merriam *et al.* 2007). Mature-age students are motivated more to learn when they have control over the learning process, resources and methods and makes them more autonomous (Boyer, Edmondson, Artis, & Fleming, 2014).

5.2.2. Challenges faced during Studies

This study found four main challenges influencing mature-age students' learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM). These are financial, situational and psychological barriers; technology; time constraints; and poor administration and management.

This study found that mature-age students are faced with financial challenges. Overall, they struggle with paying tuition and fees and other costs related to travel and lodging. It was also found that many of them are employed, although not all of them have opportunities to have their employers pay for their studies and then reimburse their employers through monthly deductions. In addition, the study also discovered that many mature-age students do not qualify for funding from NSFAF especially those who have jobs and those obtaining second qualifications.

Furthermore, the study also found that financial challenges are often also situational barriers which influence the learning experiences of mature-age students. As Hardin (2008) indicates, cost to study is regarded as a situational barrier common to adult students. Family and work as situational barriers contribute to a lack of time as a result of having to, for example, take care of children, sick relatives especially for single parents. Work hours and schedules also lead to poor attendance and completing tasks. Consequently, the financial challenge becomes a psychological barrier especially when mature-age students become stressed and anxious regarding their unpaid student accounts. Table 3, adapted from Cross (1981) summarises the perceived barriers and challenges influencing mature-age students' learning experiences:

Category	Barriers identified in this study
Institutional	Poor administration and management practices
Psychological	Stress and anxiety -lack of finances leads to inability to write exams and graduate if accounts are unsettled.
Situational	Family and Work

Table 5.1: The perceived barriers and challenges influencing mature-age students' learning experiences

Source: Adapted from Cross (1981)

Furthermore, the study found that the information and communication technology (ICT) at UNAM does not function uniformly well. Mature-age students in most cases are unable to access the intranet system especially their portal when they need to access it, which is due to the server being down frequently. This therefore is a challenge for learners especially when they need to upload their assignment and tasks. In addition to the server being frequently down, the study also discovered that many mature-age students lack ICT and computer skills. This includes their inability to navigate internet sites, downloading and using virtual platforms such as zoom and carrying out basic computer literacy skills such as zipping files and uploading documents on the portals. This is even more of a barrier because of COVID-19 when classes are now being conducted virtually. The study also found that many mature-age students rely mostly on younger students to help them with IT related issues.

As it is the case with other studies which found that becoming a mature-age student can conflict with other equally important roles and thus causing time constraints (Williams & Seary, 2011, Stone, 2008) this study also revealed that mature-age students at UNAM face time constraints. This is more especially with female students who have multiple roles and responsibilities as employees, single parents, leaders in their communities, and with families and relatives they have to take care of.

Finally, the findings show that there are a few administration and management issues especially when it comes to assignments and examination scripts. It was found that there have been many instances of these getting lost because of not being properly recorded and stored after being received by university staff. What also became evident through the data was that there are administrative processes which take too long to be completed such as application for exemptions from courses and the time it takes for the university to inform students of their status of whether they have qualified for exams or not. Normally, the communication about whether students have qualified for exams or not is supposed to be uploaded onto the student's portal at a certain time before exams. Ouma (2019, p.10) points out that communication is pivotal in effective student support practice especially for distance education students. Poor communication was also revealed in terms of teaching administration, whereby students did not receive course outlines on time. Mature-age students were also not given the opportunity to discuss the course outlines and their objectives.

However, it was encouraging to find that, although mature-age students did not receive the course outlines on time, the course outlines seem to be clear, comprehensive and useful.

5.2.3. Classroom and Academic Experiences

With regards to classroom and academic experiences, the study was able to uncover information related to curriculum and course content, and issues related to the teaching and learning process. It was reported that curriculum for each of the participants in this study was relevant to their study and career objectives and that the course content was also up-to-date and understandable. However, a few participants also indicated that some information in the courses or modules was out of date and was lacking in relevance to the contemporary African socio-economic context. In addition, mature-age students found these courses to be interesting and challenging. They felt that the modules were helping them to gain the necessary competence. The study also revealed that there are only a few faculties and departments that provide study guides for full-time students; however, these guides have too much content for the time allocated to cover them and thus need to be revised.

Moreover, in terms of teaching and learning experiences, the teaching strategies used by lecturers were mostly theory-based and required students to memorise these theories and facts. This is opposed to what they think is a more relevant in their circumstances which is learning how to apply these theories and concepts which requires adult learning approaches such as experiential and transformative learning. It was also found that there was little or no learner participation strategies used by the lecturers and that their teaching styles did not accommodate mature-age learners' learning needs. Students cited that there was too much reading from the study guides, and this is even more so as a result of virtual classes due to COVID-19 measures.

Finally, the study found that, although feedback was occasionally late, some lecturers did their best in providing useful feedback to mature-age learners.

5.2.4. Student Support

According to the findings, it seemed that these important support services such as the registration process and orientation programmes were carried out smoothly. The results also indicate that lecturers were helpful and friendly towards mature-age student although this varies from lecturer to lecturer. In addition, they did provide assistance that students needed and displayed professionalism in terms of attending to them either during consultation or contact hours. Conrad (1993) argues that academic counselling and support, especially for mature-age adults, are vital to their success and should be readily available; the curricular goals

of the adult learner should be established at the beginning of the course of study in order for those goals to be built into the course.

5.2.5. Peer Support

Although considered more as informal kind of support, mature-age students mostly used peer support and mentoring. This kind of support occurred mainly between mature-age adult learners and their younger more traditional peers, and happened mainly via mobile applications and with the latter being the mentors. This is supported by Conrad (1993) who pointed out that among the more exciting forms of academic support services are programmes such as peer mentoring and the encouragement of cooperative learning. In practical terms this kind of support included helping each other with written work and with the understanding of reading materials as well as encouraging each other to study hard.

5.2.6. Isolation and Adjustment

The findings show that the younger mature-age learners were able to adjust and adapt to the university's way of life. However, the much older mature-age students experienced a sense of isolation and problems adjusting to the university culture and way of doing things, for example academic writing and performing normal student tasks such as typing up assignment and spending some time in libraries.

5.3. Recommendations

The study does not provide generalised data and generalisable findings which are representative of all mature-age students' experiences at UNAM. However, based on the findings of the study, a few recommendations can be made:

- It is recommended that prior to the commencement of class, the university should carry out an assessment to determine why mature-age learners specifically enrol in the programmes. This will help lecturers and other academic staff to take into account the specific learning experiences and meet the needs and motivating factors of mature-age adult learners. By knowing and understanding their motivating factors, the university will be better able to serve mature-age learners.
- As self-directed, and autonomous learners, mature-age students will benefit greatly from an environment which encourages them as much as possible to be responsible for their own learning. McKendry and Boyd (2012) point out that implementing self-

directing learning principles in higher education for mature-age learners is important in motivating them to learn.

- As goal oriented and practical learners, mature adults find it very important to align their learning objectives with those of the programme (Knowles, 1984). Thus, there is a need for lecturers to have a discussion on the course outline in order to ensure that the aims and objectives of the course speak to mature adult learners' needs. In addition, mature-age students would benefit greatly from pedagogical approaches which incorporate different theories and approaches to learning such as experiential learning and self-directed learning. Self-directed learning is an instructional approach and the role of teachers or facilitators and formal educational settings has been debated. Merriam *et al.* (2007, p.110) describe self-directed learning as a process of learning in which learners take the primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experience.
- Although the financial challenge is one the university has not much control over, it can however be recommended that the university looks into implementing much more flexible payment options. This is especially for those mature-age students who are paying out of pocket. Flexible payment options will ease the stress and anxiety when they are unable to sit for exams due to non-payments. Furthermore, the university should also consider integrating ICT courses into its programmes to help with those struggling with ICT related issues. This study also highlighted the issue of time constraints. It is recommended that the university implement blended learning; this will offer more flexibility for those who have to juggle between community and family roles in addition to studies.
- In terms of course relevance and the need for the course content to be reflective of African contexts as pointed out in the findings, it is recommended that the university considers different approaches to learning which I believe should be experiential and transformative. Experiential education immerses learners in an experience and then encourages them to reflect on the experience in order to develop new skills, attitudes and/or new ways of thinking (Schwartz, 2012). Experiential learning theory is relevant to mature-age student's learning, as all of them have prior knowledge and experience of both learning and life (Knowles, 2005). Therefore, the university and its academic staff should play roles, which are more facilitative in nature. Thus, there is also a need for the lecturers to provide continuous quality feedback on activities. This will allow

mature-age learners to share experiences throughout the experiential learning process. Transformative learning, on the other hand, requires lecturers to apply dialogical approaches where learners and the learning content operate reciprocally (Gravett & Henning, 1998, p. 61). Mezirow (1995) describes the dialogical approach to learning as one that provides learners with an environment to think, reflect and verbalise their points view to bring about new learning and meaning making of the information presented to them.

- From the interviews and focus group discussions, it emerged that students did not seem to know and understand what support services are and how important these could be for their success. It is therefore recommended that students be made aware of these either during orientation or registration. Furthermore, there seemed to be very progressive peer support between mature-age learners and their younger traditional students. It is recommended that the university should make use of informal support activity and turn it into an opportunity to further support adult learners by officially recognising it and providing resources and support for it to grow. For example, the university could match mature-age students with younger students to support them through their studies, the university could then provide a small stipend or a certificate of recognition as a form of motivation.
- Moreover, there is need for improved social and academic support programmes for mature-age students who find themselves unable to adjust and adapt to the university culture. This would require what Meuleman *et al.* (2015, p.515) terms "*a move away from the notion of students need"* to the university adapting to the needs of a diverse student population. Thus, there is a need for more social activities and programmes to help mature-age students to feel part of the university community. This, according to Gavala and Flett (2005) also helps to build a sense of connection and belonging to a community of learners and will also increase academic enjoyment and motivation.
- Finally, it is recommended that UNAM critically looks into these findings and the substantial body of research on lifelong learning and continuing education which, according to Gronlund (1991) encompasses everything from adult learner motivational theory to adult learning environments, including the much narrower field of professional continuing education. These findings together with the ample body of research will also help UNAM to remain competitive in the wake of competition from

other institutions of higher learning with regards to attracting more adult and mature-age students.

5.3.1 Recommendations for Further Research

- A similar study is recommended to look at mature-age students in part-time, full-time and distance education as specific cohorts.
- It is recommended that the university conducts a study to investigate the effectiveness of online classes as a result of lockdown measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. The data from the study indicates that these measures are affecting the teaching and learning environment, academic support and other support services and overall educational administration and management of the university.

5.4. Contribution of the Study

Although this study does not provide generalised data and generalisable findings which are representative of all mature-age students' experiences at UNAM, it does bring to light some very important issues these students are faced with. The study was able to contribute towards the understanding of who mature-age students are, from a global perspective and also in terms of the Namibian context. When reviewing literature, I could not identify a study of this kind in Namibia.

From a methodological point of view, this study was able to move beyond a quantitative analysis of the students' learning experiences and to specifically target mature-age students as opposed to the more general non-traditional student group. Most studies in the past on mature-age students have only concentrated on quantitative survey designs (Wilson, 1997, Swain & Hummond, 2011, Phillips, 1986 & Graham and Donaldson, 1999) and many have only compared non-traditional students' experiences and challenges to those of traditional students. I therefore argued that looking at mature-age students' learning experiences needed to go beyond these research designs to qualitatively interpret their experiences and add to the emic knowledge of mature-age students' lived experience of studying at a university.

This study also contributed towards the development of a conceptual framework for understanding mature-age students' perceptions of their learning experiences. This framework can be used as a basis for further inquiry in the field of adult learning and education, and it can also be used by educators and universities in meeting the learning needs of mature-age students.

5.5. Reflection on my own learning from conducting the study

Investigating and exploring how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences was both a challenging and a rewarding learning experience.

The major challenges faced were and continue to be the constant disruptions as a result of health protocol and lockdown measures to help curb the spread of Covid-19. As Rule (2021) rightfully argues, Covid-19 has changed and affected ways that students carry out their research. The research proposal for this study had to be resubmitted as a result of change in methodology and data collection methods. I initially planned to conduct a mixed method study, which would include observing classes and having students fill out a questionnaire. This was no longer possible as classes shifted online. As a result, I learned that a researcher should be flexible to adapt to conditions and circumstances as they evolve.

Conducting virtual interviews and focus groups was also a challenge. For example, some participants could not connect to the internet and when they did, calls kept dropping due to bandwidth issues. I had to follow-up with telephone calls. This taught the me that not everything would go as planned and that one should always be ready to use alternative means to achieve one's goals.

It was also a rewarding learning experience, especially when it came to conducting the actual interviews and learning about the students' challenges and experiences. It was interesting to learn how mature-age students are taking ownership of their own learning and how they are willing and able to express themselves about the challenges they are facing during their studies.

5.6. Conclusions

The main purpose of this study was to investigate and explore how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM). This overall purpose includes understanding their attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies as well as the challenges they face during their studies. This qualitative study used two data collection methods which were individual interviews and focus group discussions. The methods were chosen in order to provide me with an in-depth understanding of mature-age students' learning experiences.

The analysis of data was done through thematic content analysis, a method for describing data through themes. Through thematic content analysis, the study constructed themes to reframe,

reinterpret, and/or connect elements of the data. The data was presented under the themes: motivation, challenges faced during studies, classroom and academic experiences, support services, and isolation and adjustment.

The study found that mature-age students are motivated to obtain undergraduate qualifications for continuous professional development, including career advancement and certification. They also showed cognitive interest as well as wanting to remedy past educational deficiencies. The findings also showed that they are more interested in a learning experience which is more practical. Furthermore, the study revealed five major challenges influencing mature-age students' learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM); these are financial, situational and psychological barriers, technology, time constraints and poor administration and management. The study also discovered that UNAM's curriculum is relevant, the course content is both up-to-date and understandable; however, the results also showed that there is a need for the content to be more related to the African socio-economic context. The data also suggested that the teaching strategies used did not meet the learning needs of mature-age students and in addition, learner participation was found to be minimal.

Finally, the data also showed that student support services such as orientation and registration are carried out smoothly and that mature-age students are happy with the assistance provided by lecturers during consultation hours. Mature-age students make more use of the informal peer support available through mobile applications between them and the traditional students. It was also found that the older mature-age students experience a sense of isolation and problems adjusting to the university way of life.

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Appendices:

Appendix A. (Individual Interview Schedule)

Introduction

Welcome to this individual interview and thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. The overall purpose of the research is to investigate and explore how mature-age students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM). The main purpose of this individual interview is to create the opportunity for you to share your experiences as a mature-age student at UNAM.

1. Background and demographic information:

a. Student name:
b. Age:
c. Gender:
d. How did you get admission?
e. Programme enrolled for:
f. Year of study:
g. Occupation:

2. Funding:

a) How are you financing your studies?
b) If self-funded, does this have any negative effect on your studies? Please explain how?
c) Do you qualify for funding from other sources? If so, please state which sources.
d) Have you had any financial difficulties while a student at this university? If so, please explain the kinds of financial difficulties?
e) How do you plan on resolving them?

2. Motivation:

a. What motivated your application for an undergraduate Programme?
b. Does your motivation have an influence on how you engage faculty, other students and support services? Please explain.
c. Was there a change in your motivation over the years during the course of your studies? Please explain? (if yes please explain, if not, why do you think that is?)

3. Classroom and academic experience:

a. What are your views on the course content (how relevant/up-to-date or understandable is it to you?)
b. What are your views on the type of teaching styles and strategies used by faculty?
c. Do you feel stimulated enough by the teaching and learning strategies used by faculty? Please explain your answer.
d. How important is feedback to you? Please explain.
e. What kind of feedback do you get from faculty and how important is it?
f. How useful do you find the feedback?
g. Please describe how you perceive your learning experience at this university (negative or positive)? Please give reasons for your answer.
h. Are there a few things that make your experience positive or negative?

4. Support Services and overall University experience

a. Registration process, Orientation, Support Services – how useful are these?
b. How do you find the technology used at the university? Please explain
c. What support services do you mostly use? How often?
d. What kind of academic support do you receive from your faculty?
e. In your view, how effective is this support?
f. Have you experienced any peer support? Please describe.
g. How often do you feel the need to see faculty are they accessible?
h. Do you view yourself as different from other students (especially the younger students)? If yes, please describe how.
i. Does this difference have a negative or positive impact on your university experience and studies? Please elaborate.
j. How would you describe your experience of being a mature student? Please explain.
k. Has your university experience changed over time in different years of your studies? If so, please explain how.
l. What are the positive (advantages) and negative (disadvantages) features of being a mature student?
m. Do you feel any kind of isolation? Please describe.
n. What advice would you give to the university on how to support mature students?

Appendix B. (Focus group discussion Schedule)

Introduction

Welcome to this focus group and thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. The overall purpose of the research is to investigate and explore how mature-aged students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM).

A focus group is a group of people that discusses a particular topic. They share their ideas and interact with each other. We will be discussing issues related to your learning and university experience. We will record the focus group on a tape recorder but only the research team will hear this and we will not reveal your names and views to anyone else. Also, the recording will be kept safe in a password protect drive.

The main purpose of this focus group interview is to create the opportunity for you all to share your experiences that might not have been shared during one-on-one interview.

Themes/ Question:

Motivation:

1. Why did you choose this specific university among others?
2. Have you considered dropping out at some point? Why? What kept you going?

University Experience:

1. What aspects of your learning experience is meeting your expectations?
2. Could you all share a few things the university could have done differently to make your experience better, in terms of classes, courses, lecturer's and support services?
3. Anything else you would like to share (negative or positive) regarding your university experience.

Classroom and Academic Experience:

1. Could you all please describe your experience regarding teaching and learning?
2. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the challenges you face or faced during your studies?
3. Please describe the challenges you have faced as a student at UNAM?

Conclusion:

- Thank the participants for their time and their shared experience
- Share contact details in case they would like to share more information after the discussion

Appendix C. (Letter of Consent to Participants)

UNIVERSITEIT•STELLENBOSCH•UNIVERSITY
jou kennisvennoot • your knowledge partner

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Dear Student,

My name is **Pinias W. Kashedi** and I am a student with Stellenbosch University pursuing a Masters of Philosophy in Education and Training for Lifelong Learning. I would like to invite you to participate in a research project entitled "Mature-age Undergraduate Students' perceptions of their learning experiences at the University of Namibia (UNAM)".

Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this project and contact me if you require further explanation or clarification of any aspect of the study. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary** and you are free to decline to participate. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part.

The increase in the number of mature-age students presents challenges to the higher education institutions. Furthermore, there has been a number of institutional and government interventions to make higher education accessible to the masses including mature-aged adults. These interventions include recognition of prior-learning and mature age entry programmes, as well as an increased private sector investment in professional development and continuing education. As a result, there has been an increase in the number of mature-age students enrolling at universities and colleges in the country. According to the existing literature this trend presents a number of challenges to the higher education institutions. Thus, there is a need to investigate this phenomenon to better understand the students experiences and needs.

The main purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate and explore how mature-aged students in undergraduate programmes perceive their learning experiences at the University of Namibia UNAM. This will include understanding their attitudes towards teaching methods and strategies and the challenges they face during their studies. The findings will help facilitates dialogue and ultimately policy changes within the field of higher education which will result in improved learning experience and subsequently more adult students enrolling who successfully graduate and meet their educational goals.

I invite you to take part in an interview and focus group discussion. Both individual interviews and the focus group interview will be audio taped. The only persons who will listen to the

tapes are me and my university supervisor. We will be using pseudonyms and codes to ensure participant confidentiality. Members of focus groups will know each other, but will not have access to any of the one-on-one interview data. All members of the focus group will be required to sign a declaration obligating them not to divulge any information from the group. Participation is entirely voluntary and participant will not receive any monetary compensation for participating in this study.

To participate in this study, you must be a mature-age student: this includes adult learners who are financially independent and are assuming adult roles in society such as parenting, employed, as well as having a significant civic volunteering and or leadership and those who have a commitment to family and work.

Should you accept to participate in this study, please contact me at +264814422996 or pineas.woscar@gmail.com

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS: You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

You have right to receive a copy of the Information and Consent form.

If you are willing to participate in this study please sign the attached Declaration of Consent and send back to me.

Thank you so much!!!

DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANT

By signing below, I ……. agree to take part in a research study entitled…… ……. and conducted by Pinias W. Oscar

I declare that:

- I have read the attached information leaflet and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.
- I may be asked to leave the study before it has finished, if the researcher feels it is in my best interests, or if I do not follow the study plan, as agreed to.
- All issues related to privacy and the confidentiality and use of the information I provide have been explained to my satisfaction.

Signed on ……

……

Signature of participant

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to _____ *[He*/she] was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in [*Afrikaans/*English/*Xhosa/*Other*] and [*no translator was used/this conversation was translated into* _____ by _____].

_____ _____

Signature of Investigator Date

Appendix D. (**Ethics Approval Letter**)

UNIVERSITEIT
STELLENBOSCH
UNIVERSITY

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

REC: SBER - Amendment Form

8 March 2021

Project number: 17140

Project Title: research project entitled "Mature-age Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of their Learning experiences at University".
(2)

Dear Mr. Pinias Oscar

Co-investigators

Your REC: SBER - Amendment Form submitted on 02/03/2021 08:53 was reviewed and approved by the REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (REC: SBE).

Please note below expiration date of this approved submission:

Ethics approval period:

Protocol approval date (Humanities)	Protocol expiration date (Humanities)
9 November 2020	8 November 2023

GENERAL REC COMMENTS PERTAINING TO THIS PROJECT:

INVESTIGATOR RESPONSIBILITIES

Please take note of the General Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter. You may commence with your research after complying fully with these guidelines.

If the researcher deviates in any way from the proposal approved by the REC: SBE, the researcher must notify the REC of these changes.

Please use your SU project number (17140) on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your project.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

CONTINUATION OF PROJECTS AFTER REC APPROVAL PERIOD

You are required to submit a progress report to the REC: SBE before the approval period has expired if a continuation of ethics approval is required. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary).

Once you have completed your research, you are required to submit a final report to the REC: SBE for review.

Included Documents:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Research Protocol/Proposal	Revised Proposal (Amendment) - Pinias Oscar - 17140.edit	01/03/2021	revised proposal

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC office at cgraham@sun.ac.za.

Sincerely,

Clarissa Graham

REC Coordinator: Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research

National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) registration number: REC-050411-032.
The Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research complies with the SA National Health Act No.61 2003 as it pertains to health research. In addition, this committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research established by the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the Department of Health Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes (2nd Ed.) 2015. *Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.*

Principal Investigator Responsibilities

Protection of Human Research Participants

As soon as Research Ethics Committee approval is confirmed by the REC, the principal investigator (PI) is responsible for the following:

Conducting the Research: The PI is responsible for making sure that the research is conducted according to the REC-approved research protocol. The PI is jointly responsible for the conduct of co-investigators and any research staff involved with this research. The PI must ensure that the research is conducted according to the recognised standards of their research field/discipline and according to the principles and standards of ethical research and responsible research conduct.

Participant Enrolment: The PI may not recruit or enrol participants unless the protocol for recruitment is approved by the REC. Recruitment and data collection activities must cease after the expiration date of REC approval. All recruitment materials must be approved by the REC prior to their use.

Informed Consent: The PI is responsible for obtaining and documenting affirmative informed consent using **only** the REC-approved consent documents/process, and for ensuring that no participants are involved in research prior to obtaining their affirmative informed consent. The PI must give all participants copies of the signed informed consent documents, where required. The PI must keep the originals in a secured, REC-approved location for at least five (5) years after the research is complete.

Continuing Review: The REC must review and approve all REC-approved research proposals at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk but not less than once per year. There is **no grace period.** Prior to the date on which the REC approval of the research expires, **it is the PI's responsibility to submit the progress report in a timely fashion to ensure a lapse in REC approval does not occur.** Once REC approval of your research lapses, all research activities must cease, and contact must be made with the REC immediately.

Amendments and Changes: Any planned changes to any aspect of the research (such as research design, procedures, participant population, informed consent document, instruments, surveys or recruiting material, etc.) must be submitted to the REC for review and approval before implementation. Amendments may not be initiated without first obtaining written REC approval. The **only exception** is when it is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants and the REC should be immediately informed of this necessity.

Adverse or Unanticipated Events: Any serious adverse events, participant complaints, and all unanticipated problems that involve risks to participants or others, as well as any research-related injuries, occurring at this institution or at other performance sites must be reported to the REC within **five (5) days** of discovery of the incident. The PI must also report any instances of serious or continuing problems, or non-compliance with the RECs requirements for protecting human research participants.

Research Record Keeping: The PI must keep the following research-related records, at a minimum, in a secure location for a minimum of five years: the REC approved research proposal and all amendments; all informed consent documents; recruiting materials; continuing review reports; adverse or unanticipated events; and all correspondence and approvals from the REC.

Provision of Counselling or emergency support: When a dedicated counsellor or a psychologist provides support to a participant without prior REC review and approval, to the extent permitted by law, such activities will not be recognised as research nor the data used in support of research. Such cases should be indicated in the progress report or final report.

Final reports: When the research is completed (no further participant enrolment, interactions or interventions) the PI must submit a Final Report to the REC to close the study.

On-Site Evaluations, Inspections, or Audits: If the researcher is notified that the research will be reviewed or audited by the sponsor or any other external agency or any internal group, the PI must inform the REC immediately of the impending audit/evaluation.

Appendix E. (Permission to Conduct Research at UNAM)

UNAM

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor: Research Innovation and Development

UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA, Private Bag 13301 Windhoek, Namibia

340 Mandume Ndemufayo Avenue, Pioneers Park, Office D090 ☎ +264-61-2064624 research@unam.na Fax+264-61-206 4624

12 March 2021

Dear **Mr. Pinias W. Oscar,**

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA (UNAM)

Your application to conduct research at UNAM entitled: "Mature-age Undergraduate Students' perceptions of their Learning Experiences" was considered based on ethical evaluation from your institution. Hence, permission is hereby granted with the following conditions:

1. During the course of your research activities at UNAM, you will observe the required procedures, norms and ethical conduct in accordance with the relevant Research Policies and Guidelines. If unsure, please consult *the Centre for Research and Publications* at UNAM for guidance. Any deviations and amendments to the original documents submitted (i.e. research proposal, interview guide, consent forms, etc.) must be submitted again for approval, before the research activities can commence.
2. **The results of the findings will be shared with the PVC: Research, Innovation and Development, and the Centre for Research and Publications, before they are disseminated or published in the public domain.**
3. Upon completion, a copy of the Research Report must be lodged with the UNAM Library for our records.
4. Proper, full acknowledgements of the University of Namibia and all participants /respondents shall be done in the Research Report and any subsequent publications arising from this research.

If you are agreeable to the above conditions, please sign and date a copy of this letter and return it the Centre for Research and Publications (Email: research@unam.na). If you have any queries, do not hesitate to contact the Centre for Research and Publications.

Wishing you all the best with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Hileni M. Kapenda
Director: Centre for Research & Publications

I accept and agree to all the conditions

Pinias W. Oscar — Full Name and Surname

Signature

03/12/2021 — Date

Appendix F: Language Editing Certificate

Dr.GM

The Rev. Dr. Greenfield Mwakipesile
ThD, MBA, HBS | mwakipg@outlook.com

CONTACT

PO Box 99539,
UNAM,
Namibia

LANGUAGE & COPY-EDITING CERTIFICATE

15th August 2021

RE: LANGUAGE, COPYEDITING AND PROOFREADING OF PINIAS WALOMBOLENI KASHEDI's THESIS FOR THE MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY DEGREE IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR LIFELONG LEARNING OF STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

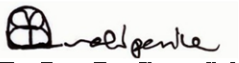
This certificate serves to confirm that I copyedited and proofread **PINIAS WALOMBOLENI KASHEDI's** Thesis for the **THE MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY DEGREE IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR LIFELONG LEARNING** entitled: **MATURE-AGE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA**

I declare that I professionally copyedited and proofread the thesis and removed mistakes and errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. In some cases, I improved sentence construction without changing the content provided by the student. I also removed some typographical errors from the thesis and formatted the thesis so that it complies with the Stellenbosch University's guidelines.

I am a trained language and copy editor and have edited many Postgraduate Diploma, Masters' Thesis, Dissertations and Doctoral Dissertations for students studying with universities in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, South Africa and abroad. I have also copy-edited company documents for companies in the region and abroad.

Please feel free to contact me should the need arise.

Yours Sincerely,



The Rev. Dr. Greenfield Mwakipesile

greenfield.mwakipesile | @mwakipg | +264813901701 | Dr. Greenfield Mwakipesile